Overcoming Challenges & Leveraging Strengths

AN ACTION GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATORS AT PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCIES

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Acknowledgments

This **Action Guide** is for governmental public health communicators who want to strengthen the strategy and operations behind their communications departments. Whether you're a department of one or 25, this guide offers practical tools to help you identify opportunities, address challenges, and build a stronger foundation for impactful public health communications.

Inside, you'll find tactics to address **14 key factors** that influence how your communications department functions — covering structural factors, relational factors, environmental factors, and a combination of these. We provide approaches recommended by communicators to address factors including: how your program and comms teams are aligned, how the political environment shapes your work, and how team morale affects your overall impact.

You don't need to read this guide cover to cover to benefit from it. Jump in wherever you need support, explore what resonates, and use the ideas and tools that will help you strengthen your department's communications approach. So, dive in!

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Introduction

Communications teams at public health agencies across the country are urgently focused on making their work more effective. This Action Guide from the Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC) and the Harvard Opinion Research Program (HORP) aims to help comms teams meet this moment and leverage it by providing evidence-based strategies to shift how your comms departments can organize and operate. Strategies in this Action Guide recognize the realities of public health agencies — different structures, staffing models, and political contexts — and are provided to help teams thrive within those systems, while also laying the groundwork for longer-term change.

Until now, there have been few research studies done that examine how public health communications departments operate effectively.[1] Moreover, the small body of existing research has often focused on details of specific or time-sensitive efforts, far more than routine functioning and operations.[2] There is also a frequent sentiment among public health communications staff that it is difficult to apply lessons from other agencies because of differences in features like governance, scope of services, and political context. As a result, there has been little evidence to guide public health communicators in designing and improving their operations at a foundational level.

This Action Guide changes that. It is based on a rigorous, national qualitative study among public health agency communications staff. Drawing on varied experiences from communicators in agencies at all levels — from state to city to regional to local, with highly variable governance, staffing, and budgets — the study was able to identify key commonalities: 14 key factors that communicators believe have important influence on their effectiveness. These factors range from structural features, like how communications departments are situated within their larger agencies; to external environments, like the political landscape they face; to relational factors, like the quality of relationships among communications staff.

→ *For each factor, you'll find practical strategies that communicators have recommended adopting to overcome challenges and leverage your strengths, to improve communications.*

Our hope is that this Action Guide not only supports communicators in strengthening your own departments, but also sparks broader conversations about how communications functions across public health agencies. We hope together, we can build the systems and collaborations across agencies that are needed to advance the shared mission of protecting and promoting the public's health.

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1   For example, please see Winterbauer et al. Health Communication as a Public Health Training and Workforce Development Issue. Front Public Health Serv Syst Res. 2014; 3(5).

2   For example, please see Rubin et al. The adoption of social media and mobile health technologies for emergency preparedness by local health departments: a joint perspective from NACCHO and the UPMC center for health security. J Public Health Manag Pract. 2014 Mar-Apr;20(2):259-63.
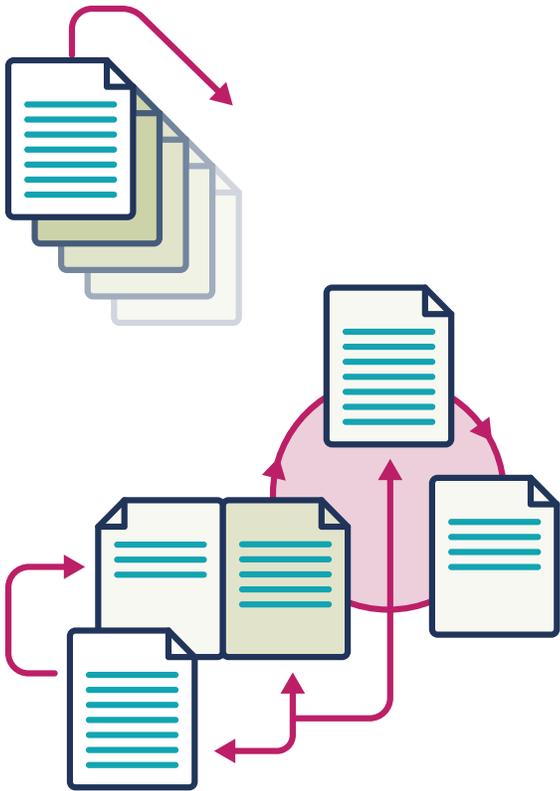
How to Use This Action Guide

You can read this Action Guide cover to cover like a traditional report — or explore it in a "Choose Your Own Adventure" style, focusing on the factors that matter most to you right now.

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The guide is organized into two main sections.

1 **Section One** summarizes the methodology of the underlying qualitative study and provides a quick summary of the 14 factors identified through our research.

2 **Section Two** is the main body of the Action Guide, and it includes a chapter dedicated to each of the 14 factors. Each chapter provides an in-depth review of the factor and how it influences communications effectiveness, as well as strategies for enhancing that factor or working around it.

> → *You can start wherever you see the greatest opportunities or challenges. Some readers may begin with their biggest bottlenecks; others may want to focus on their strengths. Over time, you can return to explore other factors as your department's needs evolve.*

Underlying Research Methodology Summary

This Action Guide is based on a rigorous, national qualitative study conducted in a collaborative effort between researchers at HORP at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and at the de Beaumont Foundation. The study leveraged in-depth interviews (IDIs) among communications professionals in public health agencies across the country.

Public health agencies were purposefully selected to reflect a wide range of types of agencies with respect to their jurisdiction (small, medium, and large local agencies, as well as state agencies), their governance structure (centralized, decentralized, or mixed), and state population characteristics (including political leaning, rurality, and racial/ethnic composition).
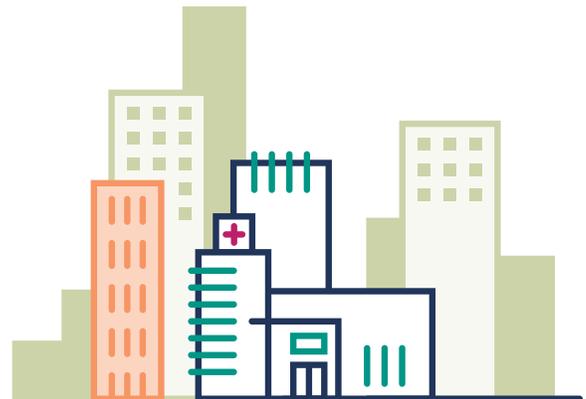
Participants were then selected based on their work as communications professionals: all participants were responsible for developing public-facing communications for their agencies. Communicators varied with respect to titles and specific roles, but all were engaged in core functions that commonly included: media/press management, social media and production, agency website development and maintenance, advertising/PSA campaign management, and materials development (e.g., brochures).

Interviews were conducted in English from December 4, 2024, to May 7, 2025, typically lasting approximately an hour. They were recorded with permission and transcribed. Analysis used a thematic approach. The study was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health.
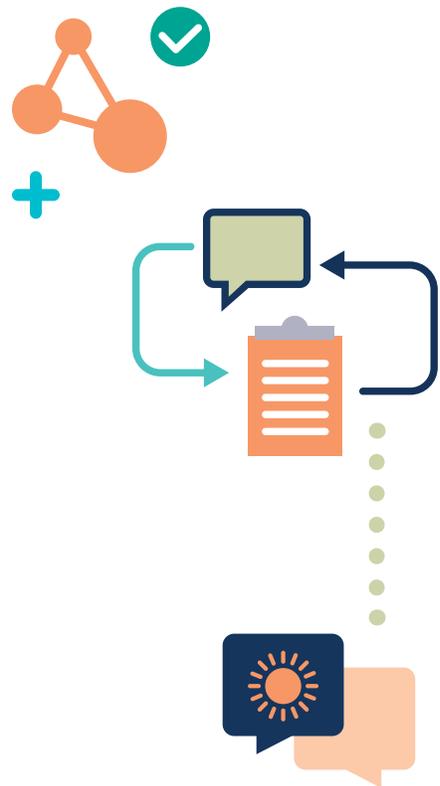
A detailed description of the methods and a summary of agency and participant characteristics can be found in the Appendix.

Key Findings: Common Factors That Impact Communications Effectiveness

We identified 14 factors that communicators said impact their effectiveness in their public health agency. Each factor has dimensionality to it, much like a scale or spectrum, meaning that having more — or less — of it can either strengthen or challenge a department's ability to communicate effectively.

Every comms department falls at a different position on each factor's spectrum, with its own mix of strengths and challenges. In other words, while comms departments may seem quite different from one another, they share a common set of factors shaping how communications functions. Understanding where your department sits on each factor's spectrum can help you develop and map strategies for improving the effectiveness of your operations and practices.

1. Political Environment
2. Morale
3. Organizational Position
4. Bureaucracy
5. Funding Setup
6. Staffing Structure
7. Community Connections
8. Outside Communications Support
9. Relationships with Leadership
10. Relationships with Programs
11. Relationships Among Comms Staff
12. Relationships with the Media
13. Strategic Authority
14. Technological Sophistication

➜ *Reference page 9 for a full overview of the 14 common factors.*

| CHALLENGE	FACTOR	STRENGTH
Less Aligned with Public Health	**Political Environment** The external political landscape your agency is facing, including the degree to which the partisan and cultural views of elected officials or your community are aligned with your agency's goals and approaches	More Aligned with Public Health
Low Morale	**Morale** The overall mood and culture of your communications team and your public health agency as a whole	High Morale
Farther from Seats of Influence	**Organizational Position** The organizational links between your comms team/department and the senior leadership of your public health agency	Closer to Seats of Influence
More Layers	**Bureaucracy** The processes and internal requirements for developing communications, including sign-off procedures and process clarity	Fewer Layers
Weaker Funding Setup	**Funding Setup** Your department's funding levels and sources (e.g., federal grants), as well as constraints on what funding can support	Stronger Funding Setup
Weaker Structure	**Staffing Structure** Having enough comms staff, with the right technical skills and sufficient experience in relevant settings	Stronger Structure
Weaker Connections	**Community Connections** The ways your public health agency engages with the communities you serve, either directly through health educators and outreach workers, or indirectly	Stronger Connections
Weaker Support	**Outside Communications Support** The ways in which your comms staff gets support from outside communicators, including one-on-one relationships or through a collective	Stronger Support
Weaker Relationships	**Relationships with Leadership** The quality of relationships between your comms team/department and the executive leadership of your public health agency	Stronger Relationships
Weaker Relationships	**Relationships with Programs** The quality of relationships between your comms team/department and programs, divisions, or departments within your agency	Stronger Relationships
Weaker Relationships	**Relationships Among Comms Staff** The quality of relationships among comms staff, if there is more than one person on the team or in your department	Stronger Relationships
Weaker Relationships	**Relationships with the Media** The quality of relationships between your comms department and the media relevant for the communities you serve	Stronger Relationships
Less Authority	**Strategic Authority** The degree to which your comms team/department has ability to develop communications from a strategic perspective, rather than from a reflexive one	Greater Authority
Less Tech Sophistication	**Technological Sophistication** The degree to which your agency has technological infrastructure, and whether staff are comfortable with and ready for managing social media and technological advances like artificial intelligence	Greater Tech Sophistication

Three Things to Keep in Mind

Before deciding which factors to focus on, it may be helpful to consider three key insights from the study:

1 **Interrelationships.** Many factors are interconnected and often influence one another. For example, those who said that they face a lot of bureaucratic challenges in the process of developing materials ("bureaucracy") were frequently more removed from leadership in the chain of command ("organizational position") or had weaker relationships with their agency's leaders ("relationships with leadership"). Communicators also noted that they sometimes used one factor to address another: for example, leveraging strong relationships with senior leadership to reduce bureaucratic challenges. When these interconnections are seen, the Action Guide will reference chapters of other relevant factors, so you can get all the information you need.
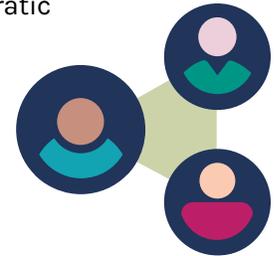
2 **Varying Control.** Communicators expressed varying degrees of control over factors. Some factors — especially those driven by external conditions like funding or the political environment — are largely outside of your team's control. Even so, many communicators described creative ways to work around or adapt to these constraints. By comparison, communicators often had more control over factors like their relationships with other staff. Nonetheless, they sometimes faced challenges in these spaces that were out of their hands, like the impact of prior experiences and patterns of behavior between communications staff and program staff.
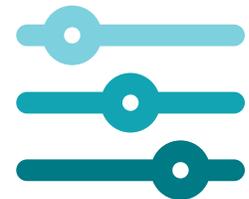
3 **Varying Impact.** Communicators noted that some factors were more influential on comms than others — though influential factors may also vary from agency to agency. For example, in some agencies, the political environment shaped so much of their communications efforts that it dominated most of their considerations, while others reported that the relationships between the comms teams and program teams was the critical factor shaping their comms efforts.
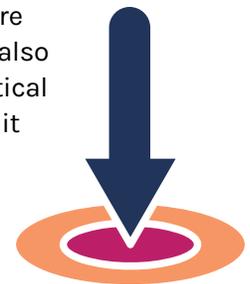
➜ *TIP: Start with the chapters you feel are most relevant — whether that means addressing factors that present the greatest challenges, or finding ways to build on your strengths.*

Chapter 1:
The Political Environment

I.   HOW THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does an unaligned political environment impact communications?

Communicators said the political environment strongly impacts their work when elected officials, public health leaders (e.g., the board of health), and/or community members hold values that are not aligned with public health priorities. Communicators were careful to explain that this can happen in jurisdictions where more people are Republican or politically conservative, but that the political environment is not purely a partisan issue. Instead, they said the real challenge for public health is when communities hold more culturally conservative values, regardless of political party. As one communicator explained, "I think it's politically conservative. I think it's religious conservative. I think it's historically conservative. I mean, it comes from people's upbringings and their backgrounds" [C26].

"We want to do some HIV testing awareness messaging coming up, and now we've got to be very careful on how we word things with that. So, it just really depends on the subject. But anything that might cause my director to get a call, get an email — she wants to see everything now that might be controversial, so she has a heads up." —C22

"Our governor...does everything in her power, it seems, to block public health initiatives. I've recently had a meeting with my director where I was basically told, any upcoming campaigning, education, anything that has anything to do with DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion], I have to stop because we're going to get scrutinized with any federal funding that gets used to promote those things." —C26

In these settings, programs supporting the health of people in same-sex relationships (e.g., PrEP) may be considered inappropriate, as may programs supporting people with substance-use disorders (e.g., Narcan sites). More recently, communications about programs tailored to communities of color — or related to vaccination — have also become controversial. In a few cases, even naming basic bodily functions, such as diarrhea, was perceived to be inappropriate within a particular conservative culture because "it's offensive to people" [C47].

When public health agency activities are out of step with the political environment, communications teams must be cautious in how they describe their programs to elected officials and leaders to avoid backlash. And that caution is warranted: many communicators described being reprimanded for particular messaging and sometimes facing new, more restrictive and bureaucratic review processes afterward. In some cases, the consequences were even more severe, with entire programs being shut down.

"We [posted] about immigrants having access to care, regardless of their immigration status or language access, and we literally got a call from [elected officials]. And they're like, 'All your social media has to go through us on immigrant health.'" —C32

"[PrEP] has to be a word-of-mouth kind of thing — we can't announce that we're doing that, because that's not something that is a priority here. And if it makes too much noise, then it can get shut down." —C47

Communicators were also sometimes not only fearful of political leadership, but also how the general public would react to their messaging. Many explained that they were exhausted by online pushback and constant "fighting" in the comments section of their online efforts. In some cases, online hostility spilled over into real-life protests or actions from upset members of the public.

"It could be something that is a pretty simple fact...but the comments that we get on posts will turn into really nasty places where people are attacking one another and coming at each other with political views. And I think that that takes a toll on my mental health to some extent." —C36

"We had [several sites where Narcan would be easily available]...and we actually had [several sites] pull out because so many people from that specific community went to that location and were flipping out that, 'Now, there's going to be drug users coming to our area'...It's a lot of very bad stigma around that in our area." —C37

How does an aligned political environment impact communications?

Many communicators working in locations where the political environment aligned with public health priorities were, understandably, far less focused on political dynamics. They did not take the relative ease for granted, and many expressed explicit gratitude. However, they were open about the fact that the political environment was not a major concern for them, which allowed them to focus their efforts on other challenges.

> *"[In our city], the leadership — the mayor — is a Democrat. I'm not saying that all the Democrats are in favor of vaccines and Republicans are against...[but] I'm not aware of any pressure [here] in terms of 'Don't promote the use of vaccines.' I think as a health department, we need to provide what is accepted by the majority of the health community: that vaccines are important."* —C42

> *"[We're] a blue dot in a red state...we really just try to talk about [each public health] program and why it's important...That cuts through any [political lens]."* —C25

Importantly, some communicators in Republican or conservative areas said the political environment was **not** a challenge for their work. These communicators felt hopeful that health issues can be understood as separate from political agendas, and that national politics might not overwhelm local experiences.

> *"It never gets political....We're a Republican state, and [the governor is] Republican. They put out a lot more stuff on their social media. It's more steered towards their plans and their specific agenda. But they've never mixed that with ours. Ours is strictly health-related. And they always seem to be really understanding of that."* —C40

> *"The saying used to be 'All politics are local', and I think that's totally changed. I think all politics are national now...[and] I think, sometimes people get really caught up in the national agenda. But...the people that work here have been in this community forever...and I think we still have a lot of trust here locally."* —C23

II. HOW TO WORK IN THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

Given the intense impact of challenging political environments on comms, communicators spent a lot of effort developing strategies to work through these environments to enhance the effectiveness of their work. Changing the political environment is usually not on the table, so communicators discussed strategies that have helped them work through these challenging times. Below are seven of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: Use Strategic Wording

> → *Use intentionally neutral, non-partisan language when describing programs or motivating messages.*

Communicators in sensitive political environments said this helps reduce backlash because it frames information as "factual" rather than "opinion-related." This approach allows you to share important content while minimizing political friction.

In some cases, communicators also refrain from making explicit recommendations and instead focus on fact-based messages. For example, rather than encouraging a specific behavior, such as getting a flu vaccine, you might share facts about the number of people hospitalized in the county with flu. Communicators described this as a way to provide "information that can hopefully drive decisions, instead of just sharing the decision for someone else" [C36].

> *"I will try to keep it straight to the point and just state the facts and include references, so people know exactly where I got the information from."* —C11

> *"We tend to frame things in terms of access and use terminology that isn't going to [include] trigger words for folks...We might frame it a lot differently to different audiences."* —C49

For many programs, communicators said this fact-based approach was necessary but not always sufficient, because even seemingly fact-based information could still receive pushback. Thus, as a next step to further reduce controversy, some communicators described their programs using intentionally vague terms. For example, one communicator said they used the phrase "adolescent wellbeing, rather than teen pregnancy prevention" [C10].

However, communicators also worried that this tactic had real limitations. When language becomes too vague, community members who could benefit from the programs may not understand what the public health agency is offering. As one communicator explained, "They have, in a really nice way, told me to water it down: don't say, 'Ask your provider about the immunizations that you need.' Now it's, 'Ask your provider about preventive health'. That could be anything...[it even got] changed to 'Check your heart health'. What? We don't do that. That's not us" [C33].

Balancing clarity with the risk of political pushback is a key tactic you will need to weigh.

TACTIC 2: Develop an Explicit List of Hot-Button Issues and Language

→ *Identify the issues and phrases most likely to trigger controversy in your community or among leadership.*

Some communicators said their list was informal and lived in their heads, shaped by their lived experience: "Because I've lived here and I know the climate, I just know what I can and cannot talk about" [C47]. Others created a more explicit list, developed through conversations with colleagues or captured in their own notes. Such lists were not formalized and could not be shared formally, but they are a go-to resource for communicators' own personal use. Many communicators said this was a resource they wished they had, even if they had not had those conversations.

"[If I could give any advice to a new PIO], it would be going through a list of 'These are the hot topics that you don't want to go near' [or community partners you don't want to mention]...I would definitely provide that list because I didn't have that when I started. And once I did get that, it was very helpful. And my supervisors are good about if there's something that needs to be added to that list, letting me know." —C44

TACTIC 3: Enhance Relationships with Comms and Agency Leaders

➜ *Build strong, proactive relationships with agency leaders at both the comms level (e.g., the director of communications) and the most senior levels (e.g., the health director).*

Communicators noted these relationships are critical because agency leaders can advocate for your work, help negotiate with the board of health or elected officials, and provide insight into the political dynamics that shape communications decisions. They can also help you navigate other government agencies in the reporting chain, such as the mayor's or governor's office.

"The political climate makes it very difficult because there's a lot of messages that we would love to get out there...that we just aren't able to.... So she [the HHS administrator] goes to the commissioner's meetings and advocates for us often." —C18

"[Our current director] could navigate those spaces [with our board] and know when to back off and when to push a little bit more. And that has just been crucial to a lot of us...I don't know that I would still be around if he hadn't [been here]." —C49

"[Our health officer] supports what we do. But she doesn't like to be caught off guard...She's more cautious now. If we're going to put out a campaign of any kind, she wants to know about it before it goes out." —C22

"One of the biggest jobs I think I have is to make sure that [our director] is out in the community and that he is perceived well. And so I am trying my best to make sure that he knows he can trust me, he knows that I have no ulterior motives or agenda, other than to build up the department and trumpet us at every turn." —C39

When these relationships work well, the leader gives you a heads up on the political landscape and hot-button issues so you can strategize together in advance. In return, political leaders expect your team to keep them informed about upcoming communications and to help present the agency in a positive light. With mutual confidence that you have each other's backs, you can collaborate to advocate for effective, timely communications.

See Chapter 9 for more ideas about developing strong relationships with agency leaders.

TACTIC 4: Connect with Your Community

> ➜ *Engage with community members in person to build trust and strengthen support for public health.*

Despite challenging political environments, many communicators said their communities genuinely appreciate the work of public health more than the press might suggest. As one communicator noted, "I do think that our community does value public health. I think that there's a small but loud minority that does not" [C41].
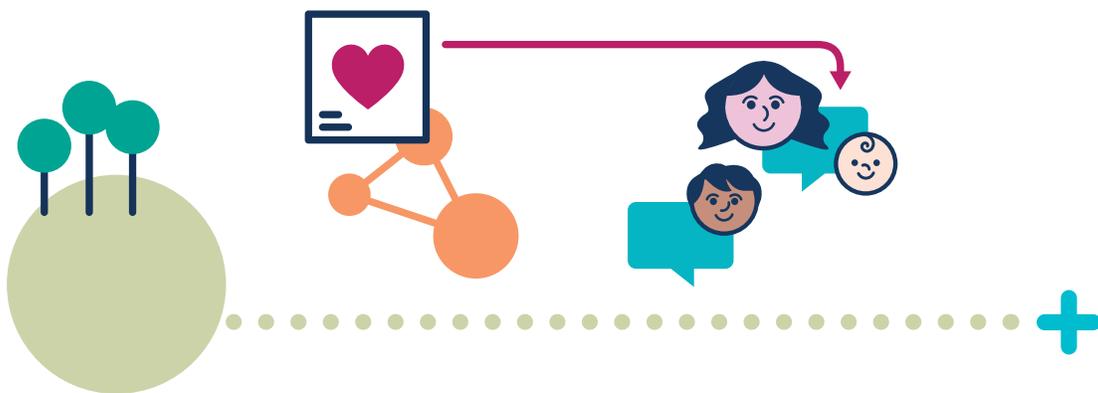
Communicators said that direct, person-to-person connection is one of the most effective ways to counter false divisions and reinforce your credibility. To build this connection, you might participate in more in-person activities with organizations in the community. One communicator shared: "We go to farmer's markets. We'll set up a table and provide information there. We do community health fairs. We've gone to all of the area schools and offered free food-handler training. We go speak at leadership programs that they offer for high school students...I participate in exercises with the hospital and with local agencies. We work with the fire department" [C34].

> "I do think that being a part of our community has made a huge difference. A lot of us grew up here. A lot of us have families here and have raised our [kids here]. We've coached soccer teams and baseball teams, and we are on different boards and different organizations. And I do think that makes a big difference as far as people's trust in us...They know that we are accessible, and they can come in and ask questions if they need to." —C45

For communicators in smaller jurisdictions, community connections outside your formal public health role can be especially valuable. Several communicators in smaller jurisdictions said they serve on community boards or take part in service activities outside their employment. They noted that this was partly driven by a genuine desire to contribute, and partly by the opportunity to represent public health well and connect with community members on common ground.

See Chapter 7 for more ideas about how to enhance your connections with your community.

TACTIC 5: Establish Consistent Social Media Policies

➜ *Create clear, agency-wide policies for responding to comments on social media.*

Communicators said online vitriol is difficult to manage, both practically and emotionally. Even when they try not to take comments personally, monitoring and responding to online comments can feel like a significant time burden and an emotional strain. Clear social media policies help reduce that burden by outlining when to respond, when to ignore, and how to handle problematic comments. These policies not only help neutralize the tone of online interactions but also provide emotional relief, because you don't have to guess what to do or repeatedly relitigate your decisions about posting or deleting content.

In some agencies, social media policies are shaped by legal considerations. For example, some communicators said they were told they cannot delete comments because of freedom of speech considerations. Even so, having a clear policy in place was described as a relief for communicators, because it helped them navigate the political environment and manage their workload related to social media.

"We have a rule for social media: We are not allowed to delete anything whatsoever. We can [post]…'If you have an issue that you would like to discuss in private, you can definitely give us a call.' We try to respond to every single comment, unless it's very negative, and they're threatening to hurt somebody…We usually try to say, 'Thank you so much for your feedback. We appreciate it.'" —C19

"We would just post but not allow comments… But then that takes away people's [freedom of speech]…So now we're setting rules for the public [which]…gives us a little bit more power on hiding and blocking people and reporting things…We try to keep it super gentle…If it's something that is going to affect someone's life, health, something like that, we have the right to…remove you, block you, hide your information." —C20

TACTIC 6: Enhance Your Relationship with the Media

➜ *Invest in relationships with reporters and media outlets so you can elevate positive stories about your agency and avoid unnecessary controversy.*

Communicators said that earning positive press, or at least avoiding negative press, is a key tactic to navigate the political landscape because it reduces fodder for would-be critics of public health. Further, securing positive coverage of key issues, events, and programs is essential. As one communicator explained, "We have to be savvy enough to understand how critical…framing is right now" [C28]. To support that goal, strong relationships with the media are especially important.

See Chapter 12 for more ideas about developing your relationships with the media.

TACTIC 7: Enhance Morale

➜ *Actively promote practices that strengthen morale across the communications team.*

Many communicators described the toll the current political climate is taking on morale, both personally and across their agencies. They described fears about job loss, program eliminations, and the broader future of public health. Many also said they felt exhausted by the constant effort required to navigate the politics of the moment. One communicator explained: "I think the constraints that are put on our messaging is the hardest thing for me...I have to put a lot more time and energy into how to word things that aren't going to be a red flag...I don't think my job is in jeopardy, but I also don't want to cause more problems for my higher ups either. It just creates a different level of stress within the job" [C18].

In this context, strategies to boost staff morale internally can help offset some of these negative effects. See Chapter 2 for more ideas about enhancing morale.
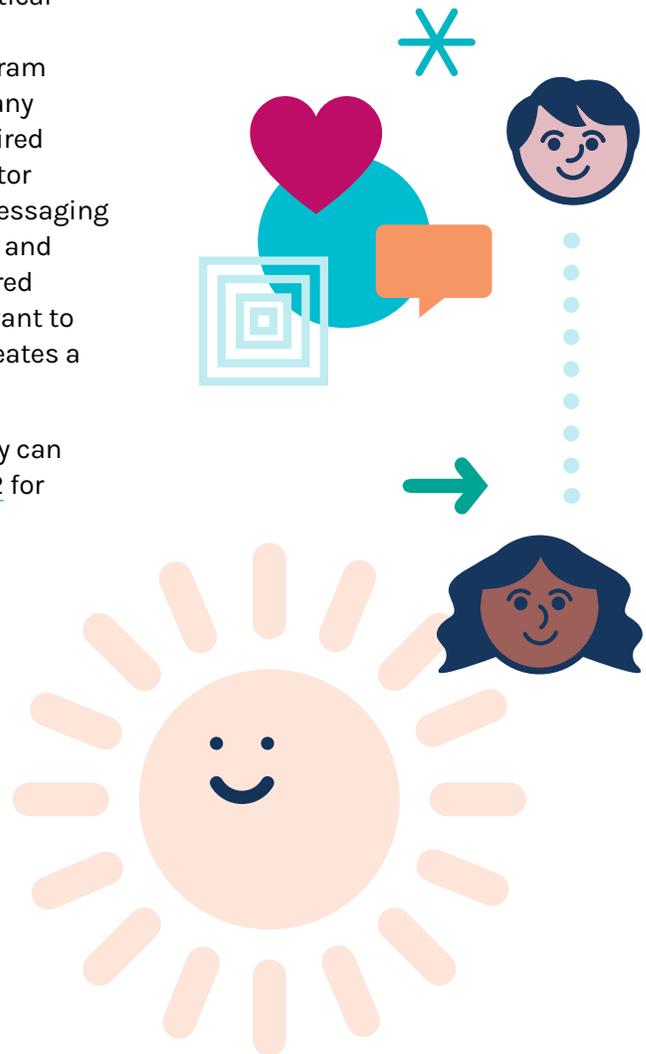
STEP 1

Assessing the Political Environment

The external political landscape your agency is facing, including the degree to which the partisan and cultural views of elected officials or your community are aligned with your agency's goals and approaches

This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 1 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider the impact of the political environment on your immediate team (if applicable) and across your broader agency, keeping the full context of people's day-to-day experiences in mind. This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What aspects of the current political environment have been challenging for you/your team's work?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate you/your team's ability to navigate the current political environment?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to support yourself/your team in navigating the political environment? *(Select at least one: Use Strategic Wording, Develop an Explicit List of Hot-Button Issues and Language, Enhance Relationships with Comms and Agency Leaders or related tactics from Chapter 9, Connect with Your Community or related tactics from Chapter 7, Establish Consistent Social Media Policies, Enhance Your Relationship with the Media or related tactics from Chapter 12, Enhance Morale or related tactics from Chapter 2)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed your political environment and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 2: Morale

## I. HOW MORALE IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does high morale impact communications?

Communicators frequently mentioned that the morale of comms staff — and of the public health agency as a whole — played an important role in their ability to effectively develop communications. When morale was high, communicators described feeling energized, motivated, and proud of their work.

At the most basic level, communicators were motivated when they felt their work was valuable, or in their words, when it "help[s] save lives and help[s] keep my community safe" [C39]. Comms work often has particular resonance because it helps people "make the best decisions for themselves and their lifestyle" [C11]. Further, communicators mentioned that they liked working with other people who have the same mindset, and motivation was amplified when colleagues were also dedicated to the public health mission. For many communicators, knowing they were making a difference and working with others who want to make a difference was the best part of their job and their primary motivation. They were excited to tell the community about the work they do.

> "I like the fact that what I do, it can be helpful for people. We're promoting good practices. We're promoting good programs. We're doing things that are designed to protect public health." —C30

> "I know that I'm helping to make a better community for my kids' future and for other people. And so that's my favorite part." —C45
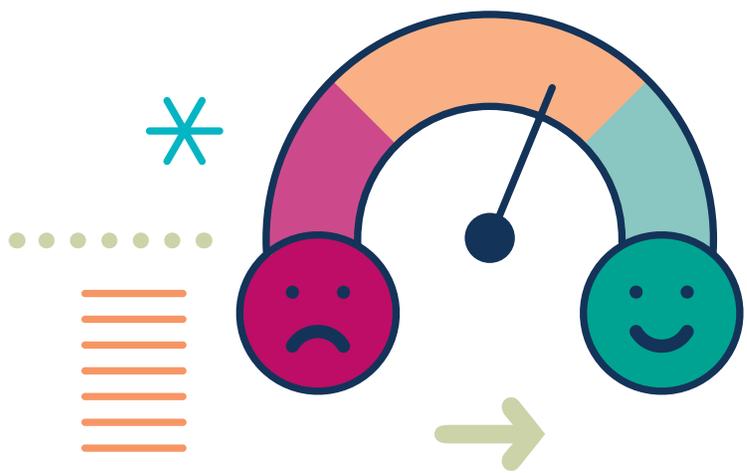
High morale also fostered a collaborative culture within the comms team and across the entire agency, creating a positive cycle in terms of productivity: working together generated higher morale and more effective deliverables, which reinforced morale and willingness to collaborate. Witnessing coworkers' commitment to the work sustains this positive cycle, or as one communicator explained, it is "motivating to work with people that care about what they do" [C41]. Further, communicators noted that their experience runs counter to the cultural narrative about public health work: "There's a narrative that government employees are lazy and don't really do much, and that has not been my experience at all" [C41].

> "'Collaborative' is the word that immediately comes to mind for me...We really do have a great ability working with one another to bounce ideas off each other, to refine and hone ideas... it's a very effective team in that regard." —C24

> "It's kind of like a family because everybody pitches in to help each other. So if we have an event going on, such as a flu shot clinic, even though that's our immunization project, we have our community health nurses coming in to help give shots." —C21

How does low morale impact communications?

Communicators also spoke candidly about how low morale, both at the organizational and personal levels, can impact their work. The COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly dramatic effect on morale. For some, working through COVID strengthened team bonds and therefore boosted morale, but working during this time was often difficult and negatively impacted morale. Communicators described the ways that the combination of long hours, witnessing so much suffering, and a seemingly ungrateful public challenged their sense of mission. Moreover, just when morale seemed to be rebounding after COVID, new challenges emerged: louder criticism from elected officials and changes in support from federal agencies under a new federal administration. Communicators reported feeling both tired of criticism and exhausted by additional considerations and procedures to avoid criticism. Ultimately, some felt a more existential threat to public health and their work that is negatively impacting their ability to develop effective communications.

> "Obviously, as with most health departments, COVID was brutal. I think people got burned out during that time. And I feel that there's probably staff here that are ineffective because of what they went through during COVID." —C44

> "Our morale and sense of normalcy kind of started to come back, for me at least, in my work...This whole new administration has just really brought it back down. And there's a lot of comparison between COVID and this current administration...I have concerns that if things continue in this way, it's basically like a COVID 2.0...[full of] disdain for the work once again." —C41

II. HOW TO IMPROVE MORALE OR WORK AROUND LOW MORALE

Communicators shared a range of strategies they use when trying to maintain and boost morale. Below are five of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: Host Social Events

→ *Host social events for staff to strengthen your connections.*

Social events — ranging from potlucks or catered meetings, to food trucks or charitable events — were the most common form of active morale boosting mentioned by communicators. They are fun for staff, but perhaps more importantly, they bring opportunities for staff to know each other better and become more aware of each other's work. This sense of connection can often lead to greater motivation, collaboration, and cross-promotion of projects.

"It's worthwhile in terms of social connection... We actually just finished...a walking challenge for our department...Everybody was so amped up and ready to go! That definitely helped a lot of the office culture, just in terms of making more connections with others. And it helped productivity because they were so focused on walking around." —C19

"We do a lot of potlucks, and it's not just one program...it's department-wide. We have done community things such as cube decorating contests for the holidays. This year, in August, we did a back-to-school supply donation competition, where we were trying to see which program or which division could bring in the most school supplies. And that kind of camaraderie, that competition [makes a difference]." —C21

TACTIC 2: Connect Across Teams

➜ *Create opportunities for cross-team learning beyond social gatherings.*

Beyond social events (see Tactic 1), create opportunities for cross-team learning — including regular briefings, project showcases, or joint planning sessions — to bring different work together across your department or programs. Communicators described these activities as both informative and motivating.

"That goes back to it just being siloed...We have quarterly [all-staff] townhalls...We identified like eight or nine people doing different work across the division to come talk about their work and why it mattered...The connections in the chat that were happening were like, 'Oh my gosh, this is amazing! I know so and so, and they would love to promote your work.' Or like, 'Have you thought about publishing in [this outlet]? I have a meeting with them tomorrow.'" —C8

"I am very insistent that my team is in [person] at least two days a week together, with those days overlapping when the programs they support are in office. And they all sit together so that everybody has little cubicles, and they'll talk to each other over their cube walls." —C10

TACTIC 3: Recognize Success

➜ *Call out individual successes when you can!*

Call out your staff's individual successes to help boost morale. Communicators described benefits for internal callouts, as well as promoting internal successes externally, which had a secondary benefit of generating positive content about the public health agency in the community. Even simple practices, like encouraging staff to reflect on their own successes, were described as meaningful morale boosters.

"We started a new thing...where, once a quarter, we take nominations, and then we recognize our public health staff member for the quarter...[who've] gone above and beyond for that quarter. And so the[y get a] picture, and they get a trophy. I do a social spot for them. And those usually do really well." —C50

*"We did vision boards...everybody presented their one slide: this is what their work would look like if it was ideal. I also asked them every week what went well, and that I got from my pastor, actually. And I think it's important, especially in stressful jobs, to reflect on what went well. We reflect a lot on what went wrong, but doing the opposite [is important]. So, we do that every week too."* —C29

TACTIC 4: Find Opportunities for Community Connection & Appreciation

→ *Bring appreciation directly from the community to your staff.*

Because most staff are motivated by the mission of serving the community, hearing appreciation directly from the community can be a powerful morale booster. With this in mind, several communicators mentioned their efforts to draw upon community connection and appreciation as effective ways to boost morale. Sharing community comments about your work with staff, or finding ways to put staff in direct contact with community members, can help them hear directly about the impact they have.
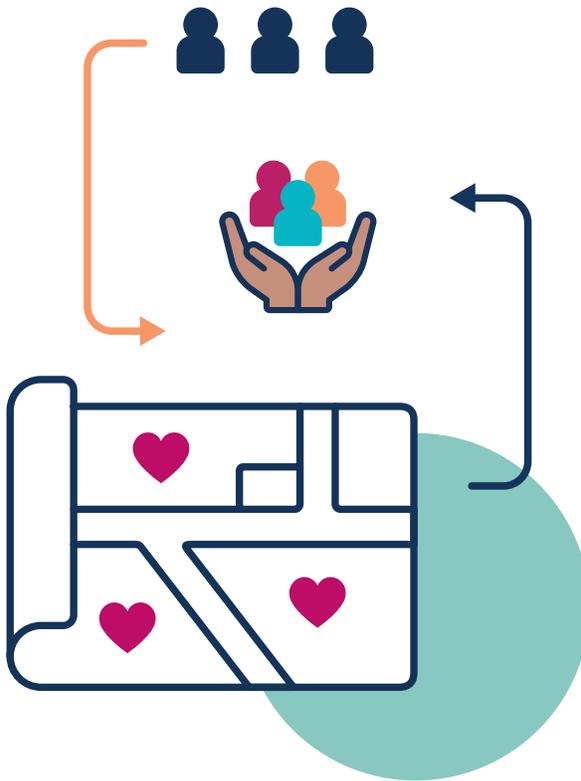
"[We are] making sure that we are showing [our] face in the public, making sure that we're making more people aware of what we do...I think just the overall public interaction [is important], hearing people say, 'Wow, I've lived in this county my whole life, and I didn't know you had that!'" —C37

"We always kept a folder in our Teams for just community kudos that we got. So anytime somebody would tell us about how much they appreciated us, we [would] put [it] in this one spot...When we just felt like morale was low, we would send it out to our staff, and be like, 'These are the people that are appreciating what we're doing.' I personally got three letters from residents." —C43

TACTIC 5: Create Training & Mentoring Opportunities

➜ *Provide opportunities for career growth, as they can be deeply motivating at a personal level.*

While some communicators primarily focused on longer-term career advancement, others mentioned sharing more immediate training opportunities as a tool for morale-building. Training not only equips you and other staff with new skills, it also signals that the organization values the work and is committed to supporting staff as people. Similarly, individual mentoring provides opportunities to grow tangible and soft skills, while making staff feel recognized and supported.

"[Our team] meet[s] once a month, and we talk about a different topic that can help us...Our last one was procrastination and time management. So, we'll just review some materials, and then we'll have an open conversation about what we struggle with, and what would be helpful from management...[Our team leader] created her own little training within our department just to check in and make sure that we have opportunities for education and growth." —C12

"I remember specific times early in the pandemic, where I was so emotionally affected by everything that was going on. And there were moments where my boss had to sit with me and say, 'Slow down...Let's think about how we want to approach this. Let's not react.' And I've grown professionally because they lean on my strengths, but also [have] help[ed] me through some of those areas where I was kind of getting pretty hot myself." —C49

STEP 1

Assessing Morale

The overall mood and culture of your communications team and your public health agency as a whole

This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 2 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider morale within your immediate team (if applicable) and across your broader agency. This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What events or experiences have been challenging to your/your team's morale?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped boost your/your team's morale?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your/your team's current morale?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from the Action Guide would you like to try or focus on to boost morale? *(Select at least one: Host Social Events, Connect Across Teams, Recognize Success, Find Opportunities for Community Connection & Appreciation, Create Training & Mentoring Opportunities)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed morale and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 3: Organizational Position

I. HOW ORGANIZATIONAL POSITION IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does situating the communications department closer to seats of influence impact communications?

Communicators reported that the organizational links between the communications team and senior leadership of the agency have a dramatic impact on their team's effectiveness. Communications teams with at least one staff member positioned close to senior leadership felt they were at an advantage. Different organizational structures can create this closeness — for example, having a communications staff member report directly to the health director or serve on the executive team. In smaller agencies, proximity can happen naturally, with smaller chains of command.

Whatever the reason, being positioned closer to the top means there is more frequent communication between the comms team and senior leadership. Communicators said this offers several advantages: a deeper understanding of agency priorities, early insight into emerging issues, quicker feedback and sign-off on projects and materials, and a seat at the table to ensure that communications is integrated into agency-wide strategy.

> *"I report directly to [the senior health officer]... That's something that has worked extremely well. For me to have that access to her, and not having to go through another supervisor to get to her, has been able to expedite our communications process way more than it would, I think, [if the chain of command was] structured a different way."* —C35

> *"I've always had a seat at the executive staff table, so that's been really important...[It has meant that I've heard] at the very beginning of projects...what bureaus and programs were doing, so I could say, 'Oh, wait - you know, it would be a good idea if we promoted this in this fashion'...I think comms, for a lot of people [in other agencies]...is an afterthought."* —C9

Some communicators also noted that having access to senior leadership allowed them to better support those leaders from a communications perspective, such as by allowing communicators to promote leaders and their agendas through the media. In this way, proximity to leadership benefits both communications teams and leadership.

How does situating the communications department farther from seats of influence impact communications?

Communicators who were more distant organizationally from senior leadership described a range of organizational structures that created this separation. Some were part of longer chains of command, while others were housed within cross-agency service groups or placed inside specific programs, often due to legacy funding structures. In agencies that functioned as a division of a larger Department of Health and Human Services or cross-governmental organization, communications teams were often even farther removed from the decision-making authority of the broader umbrella organization.

> *"I'm in a not great position…I'm pretty baseline level with a few other roles in the agency, so it's really hard sometimes to be like, 'Well, I have the authority.'"* —C45

Whatever the reason, communicators positioned farther from senior leadership said they were at a disadvantage. It was harder to get information from senior leadership, feedback took longer, and they had less insights into agency initiatives. They also felt that comms was less likely to be integrated into agency-wide strategy, and they missed opportunities to help promote leaders effectively.

> *"The Department of Health and Human Services has a communications department that really takes the lead on most [efforts], and I'm one person…We have to take the backseat to our department communications team. It's kind of a weird setup."* —C8

Communicators also identified disadvantages that were less obvious but equally important. Being farther away from senior leadership often created trickle down effects in their work with program staff. They said program teams were less aware of the comms team, respected their authority less, and were therefore harder to collaborate with — making it more challenging to be effective overall.

II. HOW TO IMPROVE ORGANIZATIONAL POSITION OR WORK AROUND IT

Communicators said that if they could wave a magic wand to make changes, those positioned farther from senior leadership would simply move themselves, or their entire team, closer in the organizational structure. Since that is often not possible, however, they described tactics to work around the structure they have. Below are two approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: Keep Offices Physically Close

➜ *Use physical proximity to senior leadership to increase visibility and improve communication.*

Communicators who were more distant organizationally said they could sometimes make up for that by getting physically closer. Coming into the office more regularly and sitting near senior leadership offices offered tactical advantages, making communicators more visible, easier to reach, and better positioned to engage in quick conversations when needed.

"We are pretty much [in] the director suites here. We're next to it. So, there's a lot of coordination [and] you're able to get that connection with the director. And so that's very helpful." —C30

"Her [the executive director's] office and my desk are really close together, and so every time they've offered to give me an office with a door, it has been somewhere away from her, and I've said that I want to keep my cubicle right outside her door. So that physical proximity that I have insisted on keeping has been helpful. So if she's walking past my desk to refill water, and I haven't been able to catch her otherwise, I can snag her." —C10
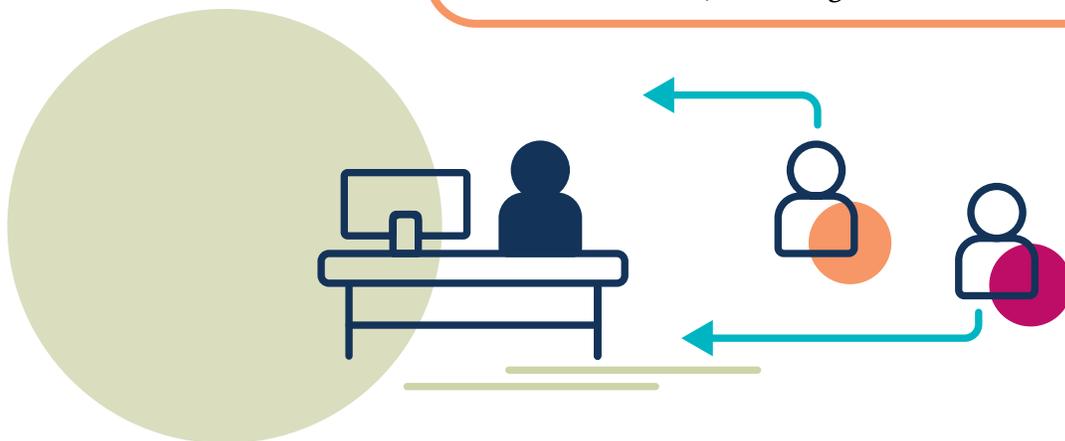
TACTIC 2: Enhance Your Relationships with Senior Leadership

➜ *Build strong, proactive relationships with senior leadership to bridge organizational gaps.*

Communicators explained that even if the org chart does not connect the communications team with senior leadership, you can still build those connections independently. Strengthening your relationships with leaders wherever possible helps bridge that structural gap. Communicators described several ways to do this, including providing regular updates, helping promote leaders, and engaging in conversations about strategy.

See Chapter 9 for more ideas about developing stronger relationships with leaders.

*"The division directors, if I ever have a problem, or if there's ever a disagreement on how we're going to respond to something, every single one of them will answer their phone within one or two rings. They know that it's urgent. They prioritize communications. And I think there's a culture of making sure that communications is an important strategy to public health."* —C29

STEP 1

Assessing Organizational Position

The organizational links between your comms team/department and the senior leadership of your public health agency
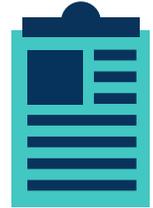
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 3 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider the organizational position for you or your immediate team (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What have been the challenges to your work stemming from your/your team's organizational position?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your/your team's current organizational position?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to change the organizational position you have or work around the challenges it creates? *(Select at least one: Keep Offices Physically Close, Enhance Your Relationships with Senior Leadership or related tactics from Chapter 9)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed your organizational position and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

| ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 4: Bureaucracy

I.   HOW BUREAUCRACY IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How do more layers of bureaucracy impact communications?

Communicators most often described how bureaucratic requirements slow down and complicate their creative processes. They noted many protocols and procedures and layers of sign-off for campaigns, materials, or even individual social media posts. In some agencies, communicators even needed approval for internal presentations before they could be shown. What can make it more complex is that bureaucracy often comes from multiple directions — external bodies such as the Board of Health or elected officials' offices, and internal chains of command within the agency. The combined effect is consistent: delays that make the agency less responsive and less nimble, both because communicators must do extra work to anticipate approvals, and because they must wait for those approvals before acting.

"There are so many different chains of command that we have to go through to be able to even distribute a flyer or information on social media. It takes a really long time for somebody to proofread that and make sure that it goes out. And by the time it does, it's already a little bit too late." —C19

"[The layers of approval for social media posts are] usually at least five people…going through that process just delays things, and in a situation like an outbreak, you don't really have time to wait two days to post something." —C7
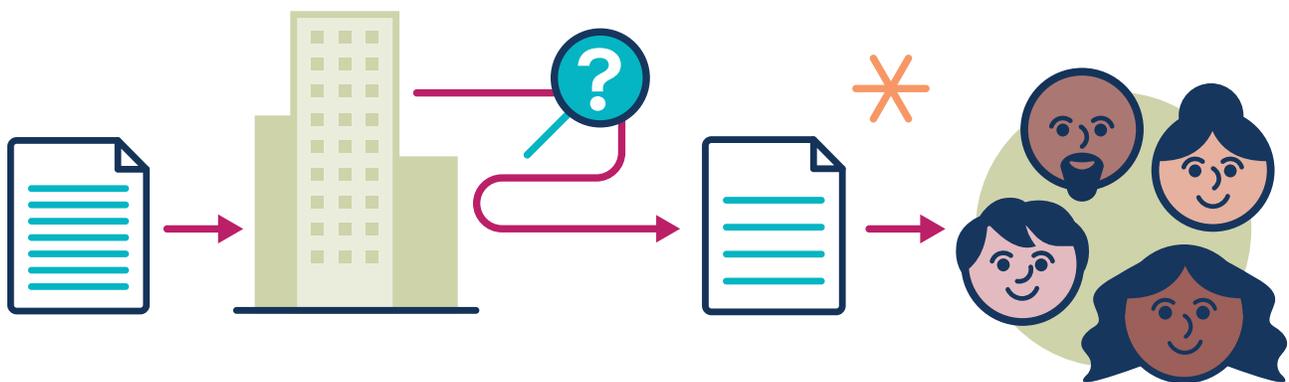
> *"Different chains of command have their own priorities...So let's say I wanted to do some type of advertising with radio stations, and I got quotes, but my finance department has other priorities, and they haven't approved my quotes. That delays me. It delays my job. It delays my response, and I can't get those advertisements out in time."* —C19

> *"Whenever the grant money comes here...all the contracting and legal part...takes months to navigate. I just wish that they could somehow streamline the process and make it easier, so when there's something urgent we want to get out to people, and we need to do a big campaign, it doesn't take three months."* —C40

Communicators also described bureaucracy in their operational work, especially around grants and contracts. Starting a grant typically involves a lot of paperwork, and both funders and communicators' own agencies have rules that must be followed when using grant funds to bid out contracts for campaign development or media buys. As one communicator explained, "The whole bidding process [goes] through the state, which means we have to put it up for X amount of time, receive X amount of bids...and it's just a very bureaucratic process" [C1]. These administrative processes demand staff time and attention to ensure compliance. As a result, either the communications team takes on the administrative burden directly, or their work slows down while they wait on the agency's broader administrative processes. In some cases, these delays make it difficult to use grant funds effectively because so little time remains once the grant is fully set up.

How do fewer layers of bureaucracy impact communications?

Some communicators work in environments with far fewer bureaucratic layers, especially when it comes to materials approval or informal sign-off processes. One communicator described her informal process this way: "In a lot of cases, it's just a quick email of, 'Hey, if I put this one-pager together, is this okay?' And most of the time, it's just a quick email [back], 'Sure, yeah, go ahead'" [C48]. Operational bureaucracy tends to vary less across agencies, largely because many rely on state and federal funding that comes with similar requirements.

> *"Fortunately, we can just post whatever we want [on our Facebook page]. No issues. I can go in right now and just post it. A lot of other counties...their health educator does not have access to their Facebook page. And some of them...it's posted like six days later when I need it now."* —C20

> *"When I need it: boom, I'm right to her [my health officer]. I don't have levels to go through. That's so important."* —C9

Communicators who work with fewer layers of bureaucracy recognize the benefits, particularly those who have experienced more complex environments elsewhere. Even communicators without experience in other agencies noted their appreciation for fewer layers, given the common narrative about government bureaucracy. Communicators in these environments often described the ease of their approval process as a source of joy and said it helped them be more responsive and provide the public with more timely information.

II. HOW TO REDUCE BUREAUCRACY OR WORK AROUND IT

Some communicators felt there was little they could do about bureaucracy, either because they were junior in the agency or because the bureaucratic systems were so deeply embedded. However, many others described practical and clever strategies they used to work around these challenges. Below are five of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

### TACTIC 1: Build Strong Relationships with Leadership

→ *Strengthen your relationships with agency leadership to streamline approval processes and improve responsiveness.*

Communicators said this was one of the most common and effective ways to work through challenging sign-off processes. A solid rapport often leads to quicker responses, smoother approvals, and fewer hurdles overall. Building rapport also strengthens trust in your work. Communicators said that giving leadership a heads up on upcoming materials or sharing drafts proactively helped build that trust and reduce the need for additional reviews. Further, some communicators felt that reminding leadership of the benefits of speedy response can be helpful.

See Chapter 9 for more ideas about developing strong relationships with agency leaders.

"I think our directors are interested and invested in communications…They just know the importance, especially coming after a pandemic… of getting information out quickly." —C7

"I can't say enough good things about our state health officer…when he started, immediately he gave me his cell phone number. And I text him…if we have anything going on, he's very responsive and quick to do anything he can to help." —C40
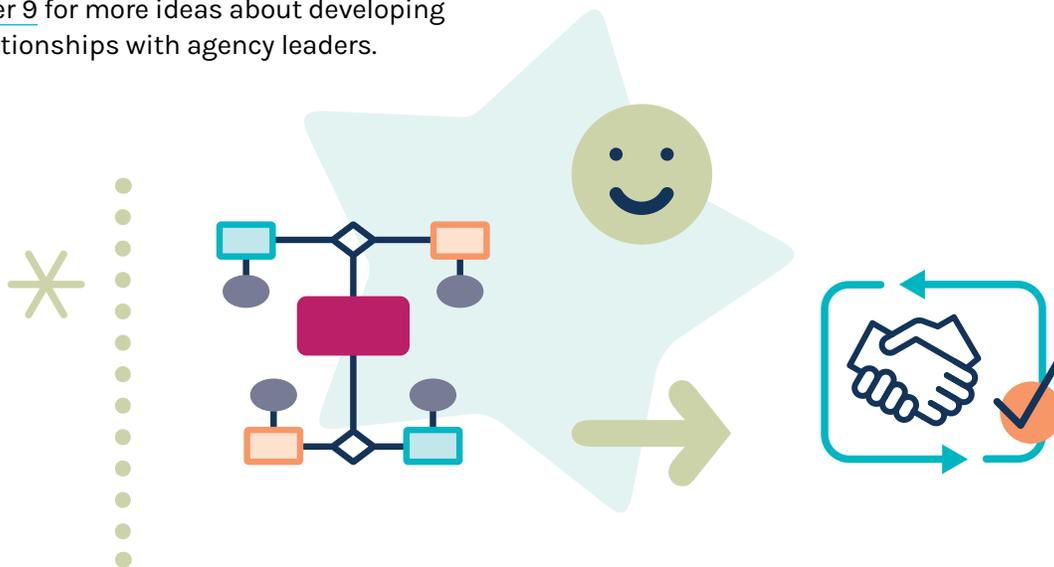
TACTIC 2: Create Systems for Approvals

➜ *Establish clear systems for approvals to reduce confusion and prevent delays.*

Communicators shared that, in some cases, uncertainty about content or timelines slows down the bureaucratic machinery. To avoid this, they created clear protocols that clarified expectations for everyone involved. For some, this means using forms or templates to outline content, timing, and needed approvals. For others, this means arranging for approvals to happen live, getting all the right people in one room at the same time, so that the process doesn't stall to track people down by email or text.

"We have specific [templates for program staff]...on our intranet site. And we have finally gotten to the point where staff can create [their] own presentation!" —C44

"I have been working on developing a whole new branding and communications guide that we're about to launch on our intranet page that is only accessible to employees. We're about to launch that now — where they can go and download the logo, get PowerPoint templates, letterheads, or fax covers, or instructions on whatever they need to do with our branding." —C50

TACTIC 3: Sit Next to the Right People – Literally!

➜ *Use in-person interactions strategically to move approvals and operational work forward more efficiently.*

Several communicators said they could often get through approval layers or get prioritized in grant reviews simply by being in the same room with the right person. When possible, prioritizing in-person interactions over virtual communication helps both creative and operational work move more quickly. Communicators noted this was often easier to do in smaller organizations, where proximity may be more feasible.

"The head of purchasing, her office is right next door to mine, and...we have a weekly meeting with her, of just comms folks, where we can troubleshoot...Sometimes stuff gets stuck, and we can say, 'Hey, you know, this isn't moving, can we move this along?'" —C4

TACTIC 4: Work with Experienced Administrative Staff

→ *Seek out experienced administrative and grants management staff and build strong working relationships with them.*

While hiring these experts is often outside of your control, many communicators said that partnering with skilled administrative colleagues can create efficiencies. Partnering closely with these colleagues can both speed up processes in the short run and also help you learn enough about the agency's approval systems to anticipate challenges and troubleshoot more effectively in the future.

"[It is helpful to have] strong staff who know what they're doing and who are patient enough to deal with all the red tape that goes along with state government." —C4

"Some of our public health specialists, who are our grant writers or grant managers…have worked with me in developing the grant writing process. And [now we include] more time to sit down with the grant coordinators and their managers and myself to develop a better marketing plan. So yeah, [having more effective communication] is all about timing and communication and being proactive rather than reactive." —C26

TACTIC 5: Outsource Smaller Purchases

→ *Work with subcontractors to include necessary small purchases in their scopes of work when internal rules are restrictive.*

Communicators said that, at times, this allowed them to work around internal bureaucratic rules and avoid delays, while staying within both agency and grant requirements. For example, when agency purchasing rules were especially restrictive, some asked subcontractors to include needed items in their scopes of work and budgets. Many communicators said they relied on their own experience and that of colleagues to spot these loopholes and use them to keep their communications work moving efficiently.

"We didn't have any tchotchkes, and we would do a lot of events. So, we made [the ad company for a particular campaign] order tchotchkes for us because we couldn't purchase them ourselves… And we asked the marketing agency [that was doing video work for a specific campaign] to use some of that funding to buy us a green screen so we can record things internally, because we couldn't order a green screen from Amazon by ourselves…My boss is really good at [that] kind of thinking." —C1

STEP 1

Assessing Bureaucracy

The processes and internal requirements for developing communications, including sign-off procedures and process clarity
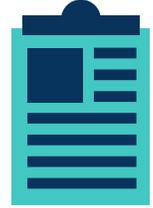
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 4 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider the impact of bureaucracy on you or your immediate team (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What bureaucratic requirements have been challenging to you/your team's work?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team most in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate you/your team's ability to navigate the current bureaucratic requirements that impact your work?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to enhance your/your team's ability to navigate the bureaucracy? *(Select at least one: Build Strong Relationships with Leadership or related tactics from Chapter 9, Create Systems for Approvals, Sit Next to the Right People, Work with Experienced Administrative Staff, Outsource Smaller Purchases)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed your organization's bureaucracy and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 5: Funding Setup

I. HOW FUNDING SETUP IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does having a stronger funding setup impact communications?

Communicators emphasized that funding matters to their comms departments in ways that go beyond the overall size of their budget. Of course, funding levels do matter. Larger budgets bring clear benefits, including the ability to hire more staff, purchase better equipment, and buy better-positioned ads. Bigger budgets can also support community connections by facilitating partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) or hosting events. When it comes to funding, communicators were clear: more is more!

Beyond dollar amounts, however, communicators identified additional dimensions of their funding setup that shape how effective their communications can be.

> *"Fortunately for us, we've had the budget to be able to keep [multiple] people, and... we're funded both by the state and by the county. So our salaries come from core budget, and our core budget comes from the state."* —C9

First, communicators explained that the stability of their funding makes a huge difference. For many, their positions are supported by federal and state grants. Communicators who have been able to shift their positions to "core" funding, such as from state or city tax revenues, benefit from having more predictable budgets, and often more confidence that their position will exist even as grants shift.

> *"We have built an incredible relationship with the Spanish-speaking community in this state because we translate so much. Every single press release is translated, all of our material. It's really phenomenal, the amount of stuff that's translated, and...[there] is a risk that, if we didn't have those positions anymore, we would destroy our relationship with the Spanish-speaking community. And it would take years to repair if we did that."* —C3

Second, communicators noted that the flexibility of their funding also matters. Those with strong funding setups described having the ability to purchase equipment or even free promotional items (e.g., branded pens or key chains) without going through long and difficult processes to obtain them. This flexibility allows communicators to respond more quickly to emerging opportunities. Flexible funding can also support customization or translation of materials, helping communicators better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

How does having a weaker funding setup impact communications?

Funding challenges in public health are fundamental, as agencies are chronically underfunded. This creates a constant strain for communications staff who are, as one communicator described, "just juggling so much. I think we all feel the strain of not enough funding, or level public health funding for years. It's not increased. Yet the demand to do more has increased" [C35]. While this broader underfunding has been widely documented, communicators also gave voice to the current situation and how it affects them. Many are facing budget cuts that reduce salaries, limits external partnerships, and constrain their ability to invest in the research and message testing needed to develop effective materials. However, it is not just the loss of funding that is painful. Communicators also noted two additional dimensions of funding challenges:

"Not having enough resources to do the work that we need to do [is frustrating], and a lot of that, I think, is we don't have a set budget for advertising or marketing. A lot of what we get is just from grant funding, from state or federal government. Which a lot of times is not enough and inconsistent, or it comes with restrictive guidelines on what you can do with the money." —C7

"I am the only person in this division that is fully city funded…I'm not grant funded at all…Since I started, funding has started significantly decreasing, and especially now with the kind of political switch, we will be losing a lot more funding, and a lot of our staff up in community services is grant funded. So we will probably be losing a good chunk of staff very soon due to that." —C11

First, challenges stem from the source of funding. Grants pose particular challenges, as one communicator noted, "You know, you're only as good as your next grant, and the COVID money is going to go away" [C14]. Reliance on grants can force communicators to spend significant time patching together funding streams to pay for salaries or necessary supplies. Additionally, grant requirements often involve an incredible amount of paperwork that pulls staff away from communications work. As one communicator explained, "We should have admin support, but we don't because we don't have funding for it. So we're often doing paperwork and work that somebody else should probably be doing" [C4].
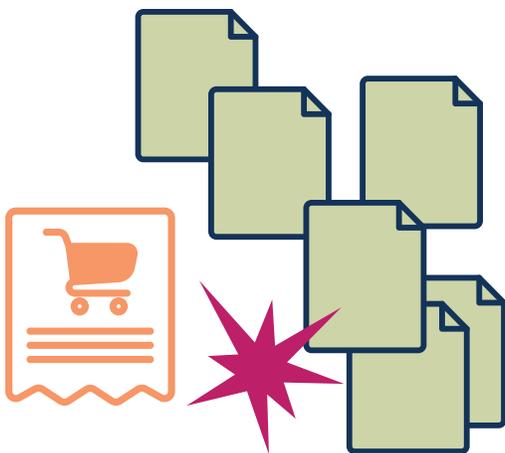
Second, communicators described challenges related to constraints on how funding can be used. For example, grant dollars often come with strict rules about allowable expenses, vendors, or purchasing processes. In many cases, communicators have no budget beyond their salary and must rely on program funds for additional expenses. This leaves them without autonomy to purchase equipment or create shared resources like agency-level, branded materials. Funding constraints not only limit the effectiveness of immediate communications approaches, but also undermine longer-term strategic communications planning, professional development, and staff morale.

II. HOW TO WORK AROUND CHALLENGES IN YOUR FUNDING SETUP

Every communicator wants a bigger budget that is guaranteed and flexible. And almost no one has an ideal funding setup. Moreover, most communicators are facing severe budget cuts in challenging fiscal and political environments. Still, many communicators offered strategies for making the most of the resources they do have. Below are four of the most common, effective — or inventive! — approaches they recommend to communicators like you, for navigating tight budgets.

TACTIC 1: Partner with Programs at the Grant Stage

> ➜ *Encourage programs to build communications into their budgets from the beginning.*

Working with programs early in project and grant planning is a terrific way to ensure that communications funding is built in from the start. Being willing not only to brainstorm, but also to draft language and help fill out paperwork, can make collaboration with communications more appealing to program staff. Naturally, collaboration on grants is easier when you meet regularly with programs and have established yourself as a strategic partner in their communications planning. So, lessons in building those relationships and elevating your strategic authority are useful here. See Chapter 10 for more ideas about building relationships with programs and Chapter 13 for more ideas about strengthening your strategic authority.

"Some of our public health specialists, who are our grant writers or grant managers...have worked with me in developing the grant writing process. And included in that process, more time to sit down with the grant coordinators and their managers and myself to develop a better marketing plan. It's all about timing and communication and being proactive rather than reactive. It's been a process." —C26

"[After our work with them,] the programs... have started writing advertising and promotional monies into grant requests... And that's sort of across the board from our cancer program to our tobacco programs, our WIC program. They're cognizant of the fact that it would be helpful to have money to do advertising." —C9
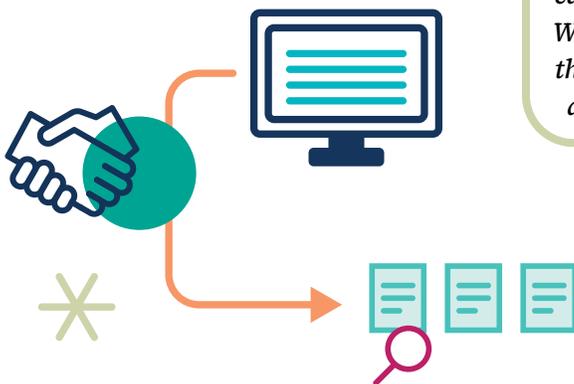
TACTIC 2: Be Ready to Receive Funds

➜ *Support programs in spending their communications dollars, which can often lead to greater investment in comms.*

Program teams may need guidance in how to effectively utilize their grant dollars for communications efforts. Educating them about their options within the context of their strategic communications planning can encourage programs to allocate more of their funding to comms. While it is ideal to plan communications from the outset, your assistance can be especially important toward the end of funding cycles, when programs may need to 'spend down' remaining funds.

"We spent a lot of time, probably a year ago, coming up with a menu of [things programs could do in communications.]...If somebody says, 'I've got $20,000 I'm not going to spend on this grant, and I need it spent in 30 days', we've let everybody know they could come to us because we have a way that we can spend it within the grant guidelines...We created a menu of ways that we could spend money quickly. And part of what that has given us is the opportunity to contract some of our work out with vendors, our bigger work, so like our polling and our research work." —C8

TACTIC 3: Work with Partners to Utilize Grants Effectively

➜ *Incorporate communications needs into the budgets of grants you administer to partners.*

Reviewing the rules of specific grants you provide to partners may reveal windows of opportunity if grantees face fewer constraints than your agency does. In these cases, items such as equipment or free promotional items can often be purchased by grantees even if your agency cannot, allowing you to extend your communications efforts further. Collaborating with your CBO partners throughout the grant process can help surface and take advantage of these opportunities.

"We have to be resourceful when we look for things to print. We have some great partners that will help print, and will help publish things and buy magnets for [events]. [They] help buy publication materials if budget does not allow." —C16

## TACTIC 4: Strengthen Your Relationships with Leadership

➜ *Continue to demonstrate the value of strategic communications to your organization's senior leadership.*

As public health agencies face budget cuts, communicators are increasingly having to make the case for the strategic value they add to their organizations. While many organizational leaders recognized the benefits of effective communications during COVID, this is a great opportunity to remind them of how essential it is to sustain and fund communications positions. See Chapter 9 for ideas about how to strengthen relationships with leadership and build a foundation for the support you need.

STEP 1

Assessing Your Funding Setup

Your department's funding levels and sources (e.g., federal grants), as well as constraints on what funding can support
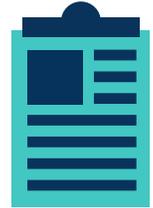
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 5 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider the funding setup for you or your immediate team (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What aspects of your/your team's funding setup have been challenging?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your current funding setup?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to help navigate your current funding set up? *(Select at least one: Partner with Programs at the Grant Stage or related tactics from Chapters 10 and 13, Be Ready to Receive Funds, Work with Partners to Utilize Grants Effectively, Strengthen Your Relationships with Leadership or related tactics from Chapter 9)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed your funding setup and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 6: Staffing Structure

I. HOW STAFFING STRUCTURE IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does having a stronger staffing structure impact communications?

Communicators described a strong staffing structure as having three interrelated characteristics, each of which supports effective communications in different ways.

1. **Adequate staffing levels** — Unsurprisingly, communicators said the first of these characteristics is having enough team members on the comms staff. While having "enough" is relative to the scale of the work, those with larger teams expressed explicit gratitude. Larger teams provide not only greater bandwidth, but also the benefits of shared problem-solving, collaboration, and cross-coverage. Even a team of two can enhance the quality of the work by allowing staff to brainstorm together or stand in for one another when needed.

2. **A range of technical communications skills** — The second characteristic of a strong staffing structure is having a staff with technical expertise across core communications functions, such as writing, media relations, graphic design, and social media. While it's possible for one person to cover a wide range of technical skills, larger teams benefit from having staff dedicated to specific comms functions. For example, some teams have dedicated social media staff or even in-house photographers and videographers, which can vastly improve content quality. Many communicators noted that a dedicated social media role is often the most impactful specialization, while more specialized tasks like videography are often a reach position when funding allows.

> *"We have, over time, built a pretty substantial team, considering we have a smallish [public health agency]... We've been able to argue that a lot of public health work has to do with communicating, and it's a really important part of public health. And if we don't do it right, there can be pretty serious consequences." —C4*

3. **Relevant experience in key settings** — The third characteristic of a strong staffing structure is that the comms team, or comms person, has sufficient experience in relevant settings. Staff who have worked in government understand how to navigate large bureaucracies; those with program-side experience are familiar with internal pressures and constraints; and staff who are former journalists know how to work effectively with reporters. Staff with these backgrounds help ease workflow and improve the overall quality of the work.

Collectively, these characteristics drive the effectiveness of communications and, interrelatedly, support staff morale and job satisfaction.

How does having a weaker staffing structure impact communications?

Communications teams without these key staffing characteristics — adequate size, a range of technical skills, and relevant experience — find it more challenging to do the work and to develop effective approaches. For many, limited capacity is the fundamental issue. Communicators often cited insufficient funding, alongside broader changes in the field, as drivers of understaffing. Some noted that "people in public health are stretched so thin because, over the years, the scope of public health has just grown, and grown, and grown" [C4], while others remarked on the "terrible brain drain" [C13] stemming from burnout among the public health workforce. Many communicators are solo, "one-man-banding it" [C31], and remarked that they would greatly appreciate having even two people, because capacity grows exponentially. Or, as one communicator explained, "I would love to have even just one other colleague just to bounce my ideas off" [C48]. For communicators facing capacity constraints, getting even basic tasks done was challenging, let alone developing strategic approaches.

> "Another piece that's been really fun over the last few years is cultivating my team…[We're] still a relatively small comms team, I feel, for the size of our jurisdiction and the amount of work that our department does. But [I've been] bringing people on who are at different points in their careers, helping them build skills, and also helping build the team so that, even though they have different lanes, they can bounce things off of each other, they support each other, and they're helping build up each other's skills." —C10

> "Sometimes it does feel like I do not have the support that I need within this role. And I would say that can be my biggest struggle, managing the workload without the support of another communications or marketing individual to help me." —C11

> "There's so much demand that sometimes it's like my head feels like it's going to fall off. If we had more people to help, I think we'd be able to fix a lot of those other issues, like being able to communicate more to various people. The reason why we haven't been able to do the trainings is because we're so understaffed, with so much demand, that we haven't even been able to have the time to create our presentations and find the time to do these presentations." —C1
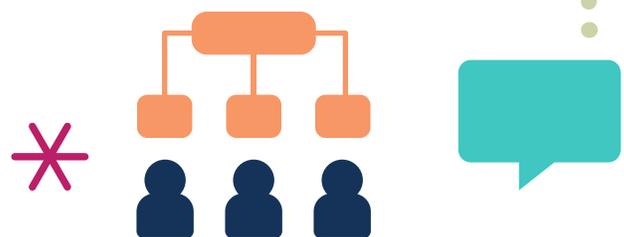
II. HOW TO WORK AROUND CHALLENGES IN STAFFING STRUCTURE

Most communicators knew what they want in a team: more people, more skills, and more experience! However, building a larger team requires budget and hiring flexibility that many communicators simply do not have. Even options like hiring someone part-time or adding a consultant are often off the table. Still, communicators offered strategies for maximizing existing resources and working within current constraints. Below are four of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: Cross-Train Staff

> → *Ensure that team members have basic skills across communications disciplines, so they can back each other up and collaborate.*

For communicators with the luxury of a team, cross-training is a key tactic for ensuring better working relationships and coverage, especially when people are out of office. Teams still benefit from having differentiated responsibilities, but cross-training allows staff to support one another without stepping in each other's lanes.

"On the social media side, I have one key staff who, that's primarily her job. Then she has support: two backups as well. But they all get cross trained in everything. So in case we have a gap in staffing, someone goes off on leave, everybody is cross trained to be able to back up each other." —C22

"I push very hard for the team to get training. I have a fund for training that resets every year. So I push aggressively for that. We try to do a lot of cross-training… We try to train people longer-term. We want people to get more graphic design experience, even if that's not something they do, so they can help when [our graphic designer is] out, or we have our digital media strategy person, or our manager will do trainings on how to write content for this certain platform." —C6
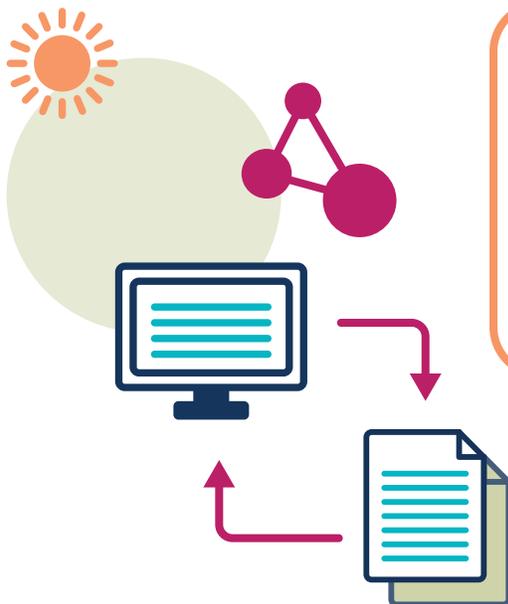
TACTIC 2: Prioritize Tasks That Align with Your Comms Strategy

➜ *Align priorities with leadership to stay focused while demonstrating success.*

Public health communicators almost always face more issues and tasks than they can realistically manage on a day-to-day basis. Focusing on a defined set of priorities that align with both your organization's broader strategy and your own comms strategy is key for maximizing impact while reducing anxiety, frustration, and ultimately burnout. Ensure you have clearly communicated your goals to leadership, so you set a bar you can realistically reach.

"Given my team's limited capacity, I've been saying to leadership, 'I want to really prioritize my team on proactive and strategic communications organized around our strategic plan goals and strategies and actions, and that means carving out time. That means prioritization.'" —C5

"I've had numerous conversations with my manager, who happens to be the director, where I just tell her, 'I think we're doing too much. I would like to focus. I would like to scale back and focus on certain things. Instead of doing 40 different campaigns on small things, I want to do ten a year and make them big.' So that's my side of it when it comes to the burnout side." —C26

TACTIC 3: Use Technology to Extend Capacity

➜ *Leverage tech tools that facilitate collaboration and workflow to make your life easier.*

The time invested in learning new software can reap amazing benefits if the tools improve workflow. Some, such as AI-based tools, can help you generate content or polish designs more quickly. Others can support coordination among staff and help track requests.

See Chapter 14 for more ideas about how to increase tech sophistication in your agency.

"I've gotten almost all of the staff onto Canva and using that, so that I have oversight over more at one time in one place. So I'm not chasing down six PDF versions of a flyer that's getting made...We have the brand built into that Canva account. So all of our logos are in there, our colors, our fonts, which is, I think, one of the most beneficial things for me as a single person doing comms." —C45

"I would love to have someone that could help with videography, or if nothing else, then software that could help me with it." —C44

TACTIC 4: Building Comms Capacity in Programs

> → *Support the communications skills of program staff to make collaboration easier and more effective.*

Building communications capacity within programs requires investment in the short-run: coaching or training people and creating guides or templates. But the long-term benefits of having a more communications-savvy program often outweigh the time and effort of that initial work. Program staff who know when to bring you in, can get started on communications efforts alone, or be more responsive when you need them make collaboration easier and more effective!

See Chapter 10 for more ideas about building relationships with programs to facilitate this kind of training and coaching.

> *"We have our own communication and education guidebook that I created to use as a tool for current staff and new staff, something they can reference in the event that they're putting together some information for an outreach event or something. They can follow that guideline for crafting their messaging." —C26*

> *"My environmental supervisor, she will not go on camera. Nope. Not doing it. Not doing it. So something came up. We had a request for an interview on, gosh, I think it was flooding? I can't remember what it was, but I asked her. I knew she was going to say no. And then I said, 'Can we ask any of your staff?' And she had a staff member who was six months to a year into the job. And she said, 'Yeah, I'll do it.' So, I worked with her, and we wrote the message maps down. And I trained her...and she just did a great job." —C13*
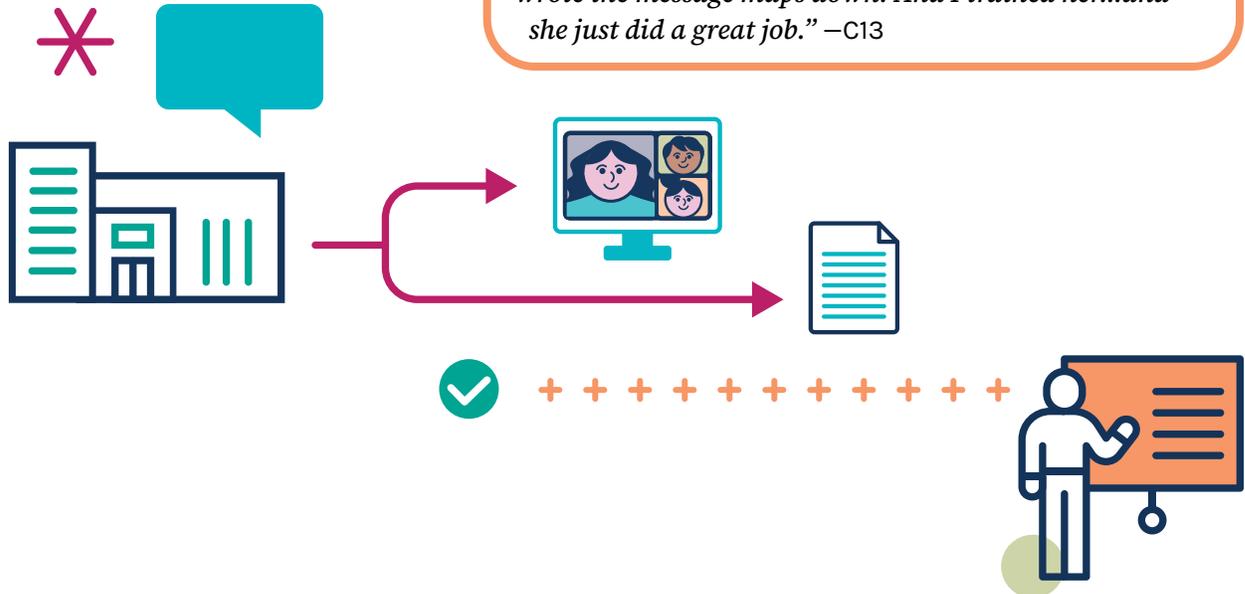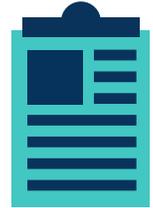
STEP 1

Assessing Your Staffing Structure

Having enough comms staff, with the right technical skills and sufficient experience in relevant settings

This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 6 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider the staffing structure within your immediate team. This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What aspects of your/your team's staffing structure have been challenging?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your current staffing structure?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to support the team in navigating around challenges related to the staffing structure? *(Select at least one: Cross-Train Staff, Prioritize Tasks That Align with Your Comms Strategy, Use Technology to Extend Capacity or related tactics from Chapter 14, Building Comms Capacity in Programs or related tactics from Chapter 10)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed your staffing structure and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 7: Community Connections

I. HOW COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS IMPACT COMMUNICATIONS

How does having stronger community connections impact communications?

Community connections encompass the many ways that public health agencies ensure they have a two-way dialogue with the communities they serve. These connections can take many forms and, in some agencies, include direct community engagement from comms staff with members of the public. Direct activities may include attending community events such as health fairs or site visits, as well as working with community-based organizations (CBOs) to share information or co-host events. Some agencies have also established communications-focused community advisory committees that bring together community leaders or members of the public. Having more of these kinds of events, relationships, and structures allows comms staff to learn about community needs and get feedback on their materials and ideas.

In other cases, community connections are mediated through program teams rather than direct engagement by communications staff. In these situations, strong community connections depend on strong relationships between comms teams and program staff who regularly interact with the public. In the most robust organizations with a dedicated outreach and education department, the comms team often works strategically with outreach teams, "the way [they] would support any of the other programs" [C17] to help these teams think through their community's needs and create assets that support them effectively. Relationships with programs and outreach workers allow communicators to hear reports from the field and develop a deeper understanding of community perspectives through their colleagues.
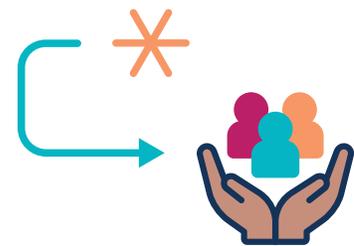
> *"We have benefited from being willing to be more transparent than we've ever been, to be more involved in the community, to go everywhere, and to be the people that they know so that they don't hate us. And when we say something, they listen and trust us. So I think we've been able to sort of swing the pendulum back the other way. And overall, we do have some pretty positive community support."* —C34

Mechanisms that bring community voices into public health agencies help communications staff know the community's culture, understand their needs, and receive feedback on agency efforts. These mechanisms also create feedback loops that keep communities informed about agency activities, which can build trust. Many communicators noted that during COVID, there was broader recognition across agencies and among leadership of the importance of strong community connections. Despite broader public backlash against public health in the wake of COVID, many communicators identified an overlooked silver lining of their work during this time: success engaging communities that had historically been disengaged from public health, including communities of color and those who have limited English proficiency.

"We have a whole division and team that goes out pretty regularly, that does a lot of public health education and community....[There were] a lot of lessons learned from COVID...It was less about what the health department was putting out, and more about what we were getting to those trusted messengers to then provide that to their community." —C32

Many communicators shared they continue to feel deeply connected to their communities post-COVID, even as national narratives suggest that trust has eroded. Moreover, some communicators also reported new success in connecting with other communities, including those who are more conservative, by applying the same principles of empathy, listening, and collaboration that guided their earlier community partnerships.

It is also worth noting that strong community connections can contribute to communicators' job satisfaction. Many communicators reported that meeting the people they serve was deeply motivating and helped boost staff morale.

"I like talking to the residents. I like being out there and communicating." —C43

"I really enjoy my work with kids, like going into the school and working with them...It's just fun to get creative when I'm talking to them about choosing healthy snacks or washing your hands...[In] talking to people in the community, I've always had good experiences. People are very friendly or interested in what I'm promoting." —C12

## How does having weaker community connections impact communications?

Without strong community connections — either through direct engagement or through program teams — communicators face more challenges developing effective materials and messages, which many described as discouraging. Community disconnect can stem from the absence of dedicated community outreach staff or from limited capacity of the comms team, particularly in jurisdictions with large or geographically dispersed populations. As one communicator explained, "We do community outreach...but for the most part, we just stay here because...there's only one of me, and that's a lot" [C47].

Gaps can also arise when outreach or program staff do not consistently share community insights back with the comms team. Communicators reported that other staff in the department often fail to report back after events, and in some cases, program staff were protective of information or community relationships. Without access to those insights, comms teams are unable to incorporate community perspectives into their communications strategy. Ultimately, this is a disservice to the work and is disheartening for communicators.

"One of the things that we're...struggling with is our community engagement strategy. We have community engagement teams across the agency...there are community engagement teams in public health, and Medicaid, and behavioral health. They're not coordinated. Honestly, they're kind of competitive. They really like to hold their relationships close and not share them, even with us." —C5
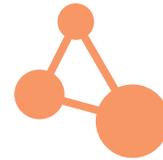
"There are so many people in our county that aren't aware of what we offer. And obviously, I want to bring more brand awareness and let everyone know what we're doing. But I will say, it's a challenge for me to get any kind of personal stories, success stories, what they've seen working in the field. I don't get those. And that's frustrating for me because it's like, well, we want to show how we're making an impact, and we want to personalize it a little. And I know those stories exist, but I'm not being told." —C44
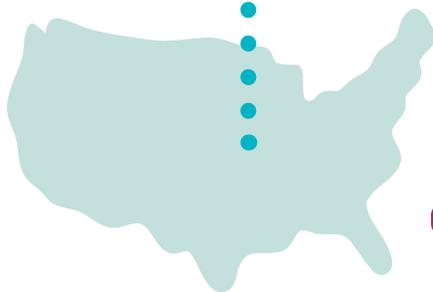
II. HOW TO GROW COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Nurturing community connections requires investing in relationships — either directly with community members and community organizations — or indirectly through relationships with program staff or other outreach staff working with the community. But communicators overwhelmingly believe the investment is worth it! There are many ways in which communicators build community connections. Below are five of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: Be a Good Partner for CBOs Post-COVID

→ *Find ways to stay connected with CBOs that represent all different facets of the community.*

It almost goes without saying that CBO partners are critical, trusted members of the community who can help inform your work and share messages. The power of CBO partnerships and collaboration was a critical lesson highlighted during COVID. Sustaining those relationships outside of a crisis, especially when funds are lower, takes on-going commitment to be a good partner: showing up for CBO events and answering the phone; finding new ways to engage regularly; and providing other supports when you can. It can also be helpful to broaden the range of partners you work with by engaging organizations that represent communities that feel disconnected from public health, as well as communities that have been historically marginalized.

"It was the really intentional building of public trust that became so important. Community messengers during COVID was the main tactic that we used for vaccine communications....[The jurisdiction is] so divided in so many different ways, that the only way for us to get vaccines out — to get vaccines in arms — was to make sure that we were working with every single community, working with those trusted messengers: with churches, with community organizations, with DSS offices, local health departments. And so that really intentional work, that's absolutely the right technique and the right strategy." —C3

"Really working with our trusted messengers who are not tied down like we are. Your community health workers, they're not tied down like we are. Providing them with everything they need. Finding provider champions, providing them with all resource information. Whoever you select, whether it's a trusted messenger, a provider champion, someone in the faith-based community, because a lot of the churches now have health councils or a health officer who can speak to the church. Just those trusted messengers, make sure they are equipped with the resource information that they need." —C33
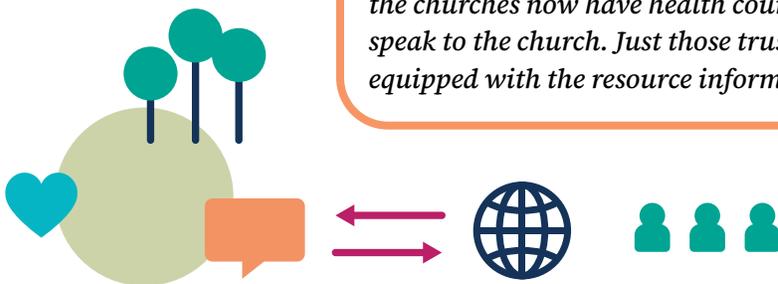
TACTIC 2: Be Out in the Community as Much as You Can

→ *Attend events and meet people face to face to build human connections in an increasingly digital world.*

Getting your agency's staff out in the community can be a great way for your team to better understand the people they serve, and it helps the community get to know your agency. These interactions build trust on both sides and can combat larger, negative narratives about your agency or about the community itself. Whether at a community fair, school presentation, library talk, or holiday event, having staff or leadership from your agency present is an amazing opportunity to connect directly and authentically.

"During COVID and immediately after COVID, the sentiment was decidedly anti-health department, like it was for most health departments....But a couple of things have helped us, and I can actually trace it all the way back to [a presentation at a conference where the presenter said]: 'You trust the people you like, and you like the people you know.' And that, two years later, stuck with me. And so, I have tried to steer us into making sure that we go everywhere and do everything. If somebody asks us to do something, we say yes, and we go." —C34

"I'm a big fan of outreach tabling...I feel like it's a great way to show face and introduce and provide a resource or a goal specifically. So I've been working with either local boards of health or other coworkers or colleagues to do outreach....For example, a colleague of mine was at a YMCA outreach event, and we provided information to the kids, like tick stuff and tick prevention, and what to do if you have an attached tick and where you can find more information....We're looking to do more of that kind of stuff." —C46

TACTIC 3: Lead with Empathy, and Encourage Your Staff to Do the Same

➜ *Help everyone at your agency become as interested in hearing from people as they are in sharing what to do.*

When staff engage with community members — especially with those who might not feel positively toward public health right now — they have a chance to listen, maintain a presence in the community, and build relationships without immediately trying to persuade people to take certain actions. In the current environment, many community members want to feel heard. Taking the time to listen can help build trust over the long term and increase the likelihood that the public will be open to your agency's health messages in the future. So, encouraging your colleagues to spend time hearing people's concerns can be worthwhile, because building trust takes time.

"Our community especially is very blue collar. We have a lot of people that work in the ag industry and a lot of people that work in logging and industrial kind of situations…And with that, with all of those different kind of groups, you get kind of different mindsets of 'Well, this is how we've always done it', or 'My grandmother had measles and didn't die, so I don't need to get vaccinated' kind of thing, or 'That's just a ploy that the government's putting out'. So when we're creating information or brochures or an outreach event, I'm like, 'You have to really train yourself to put all of that aside and focus on what your job is and how that impacts your community. You can't take it personally if they're disagreeing with you. We're not here to change their mind…. We're here to educate and provide people and folks with the resources that they need to make an informed decision that's best for them.'" —C45

TACTIC 4: Be Involved in Your Community Beyond Your Office Hours

➜ *Volunteer and be out in your community to let people meet you as a person and learn that you are well-intentioned.*

Communicators described being involved in their communities — whether though volunteering on the PTA or attending local sporting events — as a way for community members to get to know them beyond their job titles. When people know you personally, they are more likely to trust that you share common values and have good intentions, which can make it easier to communicate about public health issues. Being present in your community also creates opportunities to learn directly from community members in settings where they may feel more comfortable sharing insights that can help you support them and others with similar perspectives.

"Youth sports, I'm very involved in that. That's where my time is going…I've coached softball and basketball…I think it's good that the people see you out, and when they know someone personally, it's going to help make that connection." —C23

"I think we did a good job during COVID, of getting rid of the fear of what public health was. I do think that us being from this community, or at least making an effort to be a part of the community, has changed the way we communicate with them [the public] and their response." —C45

## TACTIC 5: Work with Outreach Workers and Program Staff

> → *Encourage program and outreach staff to share their experiences in the community so you can better support their communications.*

Learning from colleagues who spend more time in the community — either at events or as formal outreach workers — is an effective way to enhance your community connections. Program and outreach staff may not come to you naturally because that is not the norm, they don't think of it, they have limited time, or they are worried about sharing resources. So building a relationship with these colleagues is critical to ensuring information and insights flow back to the communications team. See Chapter 10 for more ideas about how to enhance those relationships.

"We have two teams of liaisons. One...work[s] with the municipalities in their regions, the nonprofits in their regions, other organizations. And each one knows their region inside and out, what the needs are, what the specific opportunities and strengths are....These two liaison teams are not based in the comms department, but we work with them a lot because of these connections and the insights that they have in the community. And then the other liaison team, they are special populations liaisons. And so we have one who is specific for refugee, immigrant, and migrant populations, one who is specific to aging populations, another LGBTQ specific, another tribal specific, and so with each of those, as we're thinking through comms, we have them to use as a resource, as a like, 'Here's what we're thinking about doing,' or 'Here's what we're seeing, and what do we need to know?' So that's been amazing to have." —C10

"We have a whole division and team that goes out pretty regularly, that does a lot of public health education and community...and our chief medical officer's team as well, because another piece is really leveraging our relationship with providers. And also understanding what are they hearing from their patients....We want to talk with the folks who are working in community a lot to see: are there some big, trusted messengers that could be part of the group as well? Because a lot of lessons learned from COVID... it was less about what the health department was putting out and more about what we were getting to those trusted messengers to then provide that to their community." —C32
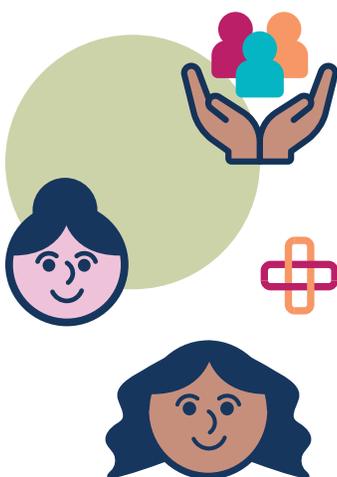
STEP 1

Assessing Community Connections

The ways your public health agency engages with the communities you serve, either directly through health educators and outreach workers, or indirectly
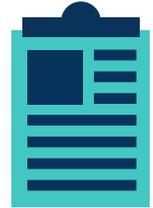
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 7 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider your and your immediate team's community connections (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What have been the biggest limitations or challenges on your work related to you/your team's community connections?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those limitations or challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your current community connections?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to enhance your/your team's community connections? *(Select at least one: Be a Good Partner for CBOs Post-COVID, Be Out in the Community as Much as You Can, Lead with Empathy and Encourage Your Staff to Do the Same, Be Involved in Your Community Beyond Your Office Hours, Work with Outreach Workers and Program Staff)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed community connections and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 8: Outside Communications Support

I. HOW OUTSIDE COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does stronger outside comms support impact communications?

Communicators expressed deep appreciation for connections with communicators in other agencies, whether through one-on-one relationships or collectives such as state-based or regional associations. These connections sometimes go beyond public health to include communicators across different types of government agencies, such as emergency services or education. For communicators who work solo in their agencies and do not have other comms co-workers they can turn to, outside relationships are especially important.

Through these networks, communicators received both formal support — from training to templates — as well as informal support, such as mentoring or practical tips to improve day-to-day efficiency. For some communicators, these relationships functioned almost like having additional coworkers, particularly when agencies collaborated on shared grants or coordinated responses to outbreaks that crossed jurisdictional lines. Even when they did not work together on specific efforts, communicators still relied on these connections to exchange ideas and learn from each other's successes. In either case, having a network of outside communicators can provide both strategic supports that improve the effectiveness of specific initiatives and skill sets and ideas that enhance communicators' professional development.

> *"I actually run a monthly meeting with PIOs at local health departments...[where we work on professional development]. Like our last one, we did breakout rooms [about the PIO] job description. It's hard to be a local health PIO because you're kind of expected to do everything. So...we come together as a community to say 'We need some guardrails around what this is', and 'We need help articulating to our bosses what we do', and 'We need help articulating when do you bring us in on a project? — It's not at the very end when you're ready to go public with something!' — So, it's become a group that comes together and goes, 'Oh, today my job was hard.'"* —C3

> *"The governor's office...has really been good to the whole state as far as our PIOs. They have a work group that gets together once a month... Sometimes it's a five-minute call. And then sometimes it's a 30- or- 45-minute workgroup, where you plan through what each agency has going on. But I feel like that's been one of the things that's probably the most helpful, because it pulls everybody together, and you see people and hear from people that you might not have if you weren't a part of that group."* —C40

Just as importantly, these relationships offer moral support during challenges, improving the effectiveness of communicators' work at a fundamental level.

How does weaker outside comms support impact communications?

Communicators who lacked support from outside communicators often described feeling the absence of these connections. Some noted that without external relationships, they missed opportunities to share ideas, templates, and resources that could make their work more efficient. Others said they felt the absence of outside support most acutely when working across multiple agencies or jurisdictions, where coordination is essential. In these contexts, lacking outside support weakens communicators' own work by making it harder to understand what other organizations are doing or to collaborate effectively. As a result, activities may be duplicated or messages may become misaligned. Several communicators mentioned that outside comms groups formed during COVID in response to the crisis, but "it seems like a lot of things dropped off after COVID" [C22], and they missed that kind of connection and access to shared resources.

"I don't really have any connection with any of the other...state agencies or local agencies... So, it does make it hard...Sometimes I'll see something that a local agency has done or another state agency has done, and there's no way of being like, 'Hey, could you send me some of this info?'...If I want to contact either a local agency or another city...it would probably be me just messaging them on Instagram or Facebook or something and just hoping for the best." —C1

"We have another health department that's about an hour and a half away from us. And they're not very big on collaboration, so we just kind of stay in our silo. They stay in theirs." —C47
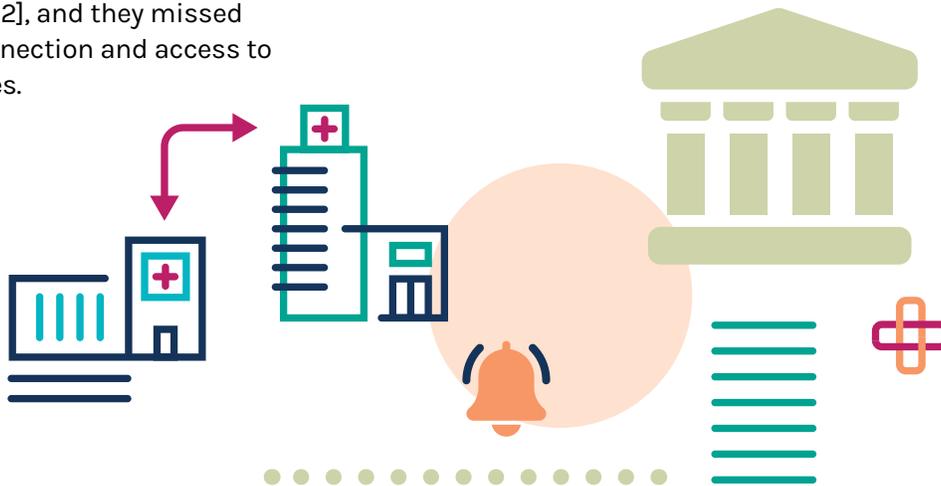
II. HOW TO EXPAND OUTSIDE COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT

Outside support can be critically important for communicators, particularly those who are the only comms staff in their agency, or those who work in more challenging environments. While communicators did not describe much variation in their approaches for getting support, a few approaches stand out for effectively supporting communicators' efforts with outside help. Below are three of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: If One Group Doesn't Work, Try Another

➜ *Try out different external comms supports as necessary until you find a group or person that clicks for you.*

Communicators mentioned a huge variety of groups and associations they belong to. There are regional/state public health groups, national coalitions and support groups, and groups of PIOs in different agencies. Some local public health communicators also benefited from support and guidance from state personnel. Not all communicators loved every group or person they had access to, so they leaned in where they found the most value. Don't be discouraged if the first or closest group doesn't work well for your needs. Explore other options in your jurisdiction or state, or consider joining larger networks of communicators to find the support that best aligns with your needs.
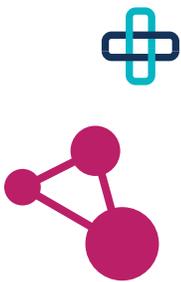
"A lot of the larger agencies, they have more than one communications person; however, a majority [have] just one. We're leading all of the communication…[So] individually, I contact at least ten other PIOs and communication directors [from different types of organizations] in the city, just to…share ideas. I ask for templates all the time, especially if it's something that caught my attention. If I saw on their social media platform, I'm like, 'Oh my gosh, I really love that. How did you make that? What platform did you use?' Even the videos, I'm like, 'What did you use for your video and how?' So we talk all the time, and I appreciate that because you do need that support. And we learn from each other." —C31

"[The local NACCHO chapter], they have a lot of trainings and resources and forums that are helpful. I also meet…with the health educators in the other townships or health departments in the county. We meet quarterly or like three times a year or so, just to see what efforts are being done and if we need support or questions, that kind of stuff. And that's really helped." —C46

TACTIC 2: Watch Other Public Health Agencies' Communications

→ *Do not be afraid to follow and learn from other public health agencies that are doing strong communications work.*

Look at what other agencies are doing — review their websites and follow them on social media. If you like what you see, they may have resources available to you, or you may be able to model your activities on their successes. If you are in a local public health agency, your own state's health agency can be an especially valuable source of support, often offering templates, messaging, or content assistance. Materials may be unavailable or hard to find on the website, so reach out and ask!

"Our state health department has great communications, oftentimes that are already [translated] in English and Spanish....When agencies have toolkits and resources available in English and Spanish, that is lifechanging for me in my role." —C27

"[The state agency] sent us a campaign to use for suicide prevention that [they use], and they were very helpful, and like, 'Oh, yeah, here it is. You can use it however you want.'" —C7

TACTIC 3: Look to National Groups

→ *Take advantage of resources from national public health communications organizations by joining or attending sessions that seem relevant for your needs.*

To supplement what you have access to through local member-based groups, look for larger, national groups, like NACCHO (National Association of County and City Health Officials), NPHIC (the National Public Health Information Coalition), and the de Beaumont Foundation's Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC). These organizations provide a wide range of resources, including templates, newsletters, and trainings. In addition, they offer opportunities to connect with other communicators working on similar issues, helping you build relationships and share insights.

"All of the supporting things from Johns Hopkins or the Public Health Communications Collaborative, they have great messaging that's been tested already." —C46

"I just started joining health organizations, anything I could...NACCHO and NPHIC and anything related to that, I would join, just so that I could start getting the emails, and then just start reading all of their newsletters, so that I could just start getting familiar with everything. I would just read anything I could get my hands on." —C50
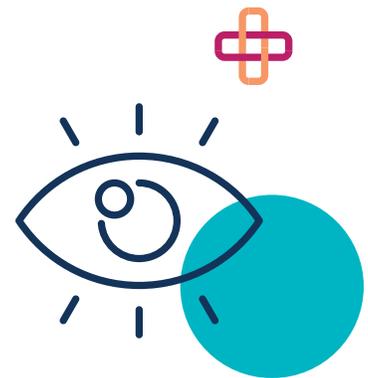
STEP 1

Assessing Outside Communications Support

The ways in which your comms staff gets support from outside communicators, including one-on-one relationships or through a collective
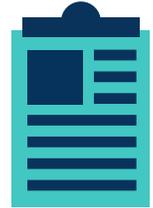
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 8 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider outside communications support for you or your immediate team (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What has been challenging about creating or sustaining external communications support for you/ your team?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate the strength of your current relationships with external communicators?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to create or sustain these relationships? *(Select at least one: If One Group Doesn't Work Try Another, Watch Other Public Health Agencies' Communications, Look to National Groups)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed your outside communications support and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 9: Relationships with Leadership

I.   HOW RELATIONSHIPS WITH LEADERSHIP IMPACT COMMUNICATIONS

How does a stronger relationship with leadership impact communications?

The benefits of a strong relationship between the communications team and leadership are difficult to overstate, according to communicators. They describe these relationships as "priceless" [C35] and "the secret sauce" [C29] because they influence so many aspects of communications. Perhaps most fundamentally, strong relationships mean senior leaders help position communications strategically within the organization. When communications is included in the decision-making process, the comms team has autonomy to shape strategy for programs, rather than being viewed only as a media or social media service function.

A close relationship with leadership also means stronger advocacy with key stakeholders, such as elected officials or boards of health. Agency leaders not only champion communications approaches, but also share insights about external stakeholders' perspectives, which "helps [communicators] get some of that insight that [agency leaders are] getting" [C10]. This allows the comms team to design approaches that anticipate the agency's needs and avoid problems. As one communicator summarized simply, "The commissioner...[has been] our champion in so many ways for our relationships with other offices...She steps in, makes it easier" [C14].

At a more personal level, communicators said that positive relationships with leadership often lead to professional development support and, in some cases, direct mentoring. These opportunities help motivate them, strengthen their effectiveness, and make them more likely to stay with the agency, even in difficult times.

"[The director is] able to be an advocate for me...If she's in a meeting that I'm not in or in a community group that I'm not in, and she hears a communications opportunity, she will tell that staff...'Hey, make sure that you've connected with [the comms team] about that.'...To have her as a champion and an advocate, I think has been priceless, honestly." —C35

"I think it's our director, honestly. She's fantastic. And she's also very understanding. Yes, we're a government organization, but life happens. And I wouldn't say that she's lenient, but she's understanding. And I think that makes a very big difference." —C37

"My executive director is super supportive of professional growth." —C29

How does a weaker relationship with senior leadership impact communications?

When communications teams have weaker relationships with senior leadership, communicators said it makes nearly every part of their job harder. They reported that it limits their ability to function effectively because they lack insight into what the agency expects from them — and they lack the authority to carry out the work they are responsible for. As a result, communicators described awkward processes and said they often felt like they were constantly having to justify their work.

"[The director] has a good sense of what he wants in terms of his vision. In terms of how that is executed, I'm still trying to get my arms around a little bit....He just [doesn't] respond at all sometimes to emails." —C39

"My boss doesn't really have any oversight of what we're doing or understanding of what we're doing on a daily basis. So, I can ask our Spanish translator to translate the measles social media that I sent her ten times, and she won't translate it...No one has any reason to be accountable." —C29

Limited relationships with senior leadership also make even the smallest details more challenging, from getting sign-off on social media posts to making basic purchases. One communicator shared that the state of her photography equipment reflected the poor relationship between communications and senior leadership she inherited: "When I first came on board...I did not have a camera. I did not have a tripod. Like, there was nothing...I was using a lot of my own equipment...If leadership supported and really valued the role as a communications division, then there would be an understanding...[that] these tools are necessary" [C31].

II. HOW TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Many communicators said they felt very lucky to have a naturally strong relationship with senior leadership, and certain circumstances made that more likely. In several agencies, senior leaders had a communications background or were former PIOs, which brought a built-in appreciation for communications and often a stronger working relationship with comms staff. In other cases, the comms staff reported directly to senior leadership, creating more opportunities to build rapport. But even with these advantages, communicators said they still worked intentionally to grow their relationships with senior leadership. Below are five of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: Increase the Visibility of Communications

> ➜ *Increase your visibility at meetings and events to grow relationships with senior leadership.*

Many communicators recommended being in the room for meetings, discussions, and events that involve senior leadership whenever possible. Being physically present raises awareness of your work, reminds leaders to include communications in strategic conversations, and builds familiarity over time.

"I have a director-level title, which means I attend senior-level leadership meetings every other week. I report out regularly in those meetings. I feel like my position has been set up for success by senior or executive leadership with my other division directors, so I meet with them.... They show, in meetings, regular respect and support for our work. They elevate our work." —C17

"Having good relationships with our executive leadership team [matters]. So the executive director, medical director and deputy directors, that's really helpful because they're the ones who are most directly connected with what's happening at, say, the county manager's office and with the board of supervisors, and so having really good relationships with them helps me get some of that insight that they're getting, and they're very savvy. So part of it is also knowing when to funnel things up, like, 'Hey, this might be a thing that you should know about.'" —C10

TACTIC 2: Provide Written Updates

→ *Send regular, proactive updates to senior leadership via email or short newsletters.*

Communicators shared that written summaries to leadership keep the communications team top of mind, help leaders appreciate the breadth of communications activities, and build trust by increasing transparency. Updates also encourage dialogue, since senior staff may respond, ask questions, or forward your updates to others.

"I do try to go [to commission board meetings] if I can… It made me understand my target audience a bit better… [I also send out] the monthly newsletter…As we share it with the public, I also share it with all of the local board of health commission members, and then the other key people who put out the information on their own township's public facing websites, social media…So it's this big, overarching dissemination directory that we use." —C46

TACTIC 3: Speak to Strategy

→ *Frame updates in terms of the agency's strategy and overall well-being in meetings or communications with senior leadership.*

Communicators explained that this is where senior leadership focuses their attention, so showing how communications supports the agency's goals signals that you are a strategic partner who can help move the agency forward.

"[I identify] how our work as the comms team is supporting the overall department goals and priorities. So, working with leadership and senior leadership within the department on, 'Okay, what are the things that we're seeing from the comms side?' and sharing that upwards. What are they working on that we can be planning ahead for and supporting?" —C10

"People have to view communications not only as a supporting role or function, but really a strategic partner in achieving the department's broader goal. So in events or programs, if they have workshops or something that they want to — I always say let's spread as many good news stories as we possibly can, both internally and externally." —C31
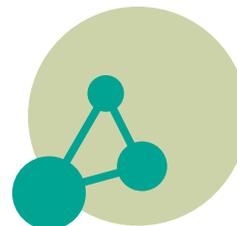
TACTIC 4: Promote Leadership

➜ *Highlight the successes of senior leadership and the agency as a whole when opportunities arise.*

Showcasing the work of the most senior staff (often the health director or equivalent role), whether through media stories, events, or internal updates, helps leaders feel supported and valued. It also gives you meaningful time with them, builds goodwill, and strengthens your relationship over time.

"I sit at the top. I have direct access to [the secretary]...I get one-on-one time with him for his personal brand and profile...It's wonderful. Because my boss is the chief of staff...I'm constantly providing guidance on the secretary's profile and get specific time to help build that out." —C3

"[With the new health officer], I'm still trying to...make sure that I am meeting his expectations...because one of the biggest jobs I think I have is to make sure that he is out in the community and that he is perceived well. And so, I am trying my best to make sure that he knows he can trust me, he knows that I have no ulterior motives or agenda, other than to build up the department and trumpet us at every turn." —C39
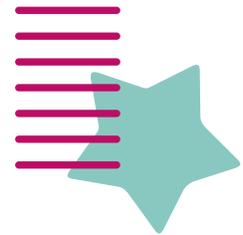
TACTIC 5: Build on Successes

➜ *Use wins in the communications space to reinforce your value and deepen your partnership with leadership.*

Communicators described this as building on a positive upcycle: each success makes senior leadership more likely to advocate for communications, include your team in strategic planning, and respond quickly to your needs. These success stories also give senior leadership concrete examples they can use to motivate staff across the agency.

"The fact that we've had a lot of wins on the press side...has built me some capital to help guide things a certain way when we're having conversations. I'm not the final say on many things, but I appreciate that people hear me out and listen to my advice." —C6

"What has begun to gain traction: I send out notifications pretty often to the team, so they can send me information on any community engagement events that they have coming up, any outreach opportunities, any trainings, workshops, any opportunity where they're connecting with the residents and the clients that we serve. I like to come. I take the pictures. I'll take videos. I'll produce the videos, and that will go on our social media platforms as well." —C31

STEP 1

Assessing Relationships with Leadership

The quality of relationships between your comms team/department and the executive leadership of your public health agency
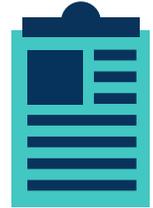
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 9 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider your relationships with leadership, as well as relationships between your immediate team and leadership (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What has been challenging about creating or sustaining relationships with leadership?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your/your team's current relationships with leadership?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to grow your/your team's relationships with leadership? *(Select at least one: Increase the Visibility of Communications, Provide Written Updates, Speak to Strategy, Promote Leadership, Build on Successes)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed relationships with leadership and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 10: Relationships with Programs

I.   HOW RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROGRAMS IMPACT COMMUNICATIONS

How do stronger relationships with programs impact communications?

Stronger relationships with program staff are one of the key drivers of success for communications work. Communicators and program staff collaborate on many tasks, from promoting specific initiatives to responding to media requests, and these relationships make that collaboration smoother and more productive. Program staff provide the substantive knowledge and subject-matter expertise that communicators rely on to make communications accurate, as well as knowledge of the audience and context to make outreach appropriate and effective.

"Creating relationships within the departments [is important] because...we lean on those people as content experts, and then we're able to collaborate together so that the message is...credible... and also digestible." —C18

Good relationships are also key to making the work timely. Communicators need to be brought in early enough to shape strategy, develop effective approaches and materials, and support program staff in responding quickly when media requests arise. Ideally, program staff proactively share strategic insights about their content area, including "if there's something brewing that may hit the news or gain media attention" [C15]. Taken together, communicators said that much of their strategic work is possible "because of the solid relationship" with program staff [C17].

"Honestly, it took about a year for people to...trust me and invite me to meetings that I needed to be a part of...[Now] people are very good about reaching out, especially program leads...I feel like that process works very well and...I'm able to meet with them and get a very clear vision of what they want." —C11

How do weaker relationships with programs impact communications?

According to communicators, weaker relationships with programs typically stem from one of two dynamics. First, program staff may simply not know about, or fully understand, how the communications staff can support their work. This is especially common in larger agencies or those with high staff turnover. Second, program staff may be aware of the communications team but feel hesitant to collaborate with them, because they perceive that comms staff will limit or alter the ways they want to promote their efforts. Program staff may feel criticized when communicators enforce communications protocols, such as using design templates to increase or maintain brand recognition or conducting word checks to ensure appropriate reading levels. Over time, this can create a reluctance to work together.

"I think, right now is there's a perception that my shop, the communications bureau, is the gatekeeper or is just going to strike your thing down…And that perception isn't great and causes some — not hostility — but some butting heads. Sometimes we have to tell folks 'Hey, this messaging won't resonate' or 'There's a broader department-wide reason why we can't do this right now,' or 'Say x, y, z.' And that part isn't fun." —C2

"I think it's hard to build a culture of communication because, at least from my perspective, in governmental public health, there's a lot of ownership of projects and work…Sometimes I know people feel like communications wants to come in and take over or tell their story in a way that they don't want to tell it…So I think those are barriers." —C8

When there is a disconnect between communicators and program staff, one of the biggest challenges is that communications teams are brought in too late to the game, making them less effective in promoting the work of programs or the agency as a whole. A late start makes it harder to create a cohesive strategy for a program initiative or to ensure the work aligns with and leverages agency-wide communications strategies. Communicators also said they sometimes miss opportunities to promote events or initiatives altogether because there is not enough time to develop or distribute materials.

"Communications is not always on the forefront of their [co-workers'] mind[s]. So a lot of the time, I'm getting things after the fact or in the middle of it happening, or the day of, or day before, because it's not something that they think about regularly, right? To get it out, or to talk to the community, or the timeline on which that needs to happen. So, there are definitely some struggles." —C45

These disconnects also create challenges when responding to media requests. Without timely collaboration, the agency risks having press coverage that lacks the public health perspective or fails to highlight the agency's role.

> *"Another thing...I struggle with all the time: timeliness. There is no sense of urgency. If I'm contacting or trying to reach out to the subject matter expert for something that a reporter reached out to [us for], it will take days...I remember one time it took weeks."* — C31

Taken together, weaker relationships can create a negative spiral: program staff hesitate to engage with communications; communicators then struggle to do their best work; and as a result, program staff become even less likely to reach out the next time. Over time, this cycle reduces both morale and overall effectiveness.

II. HOW TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH PROGRAMS

Communicators noted that building relationships with program staff can be more challenging, depending on how the agency is structured. In agencies with multiple sites or primarily remote staff, relationships can be harder to establish, especially when the number of comms staff isn't aligned with the scale of the work. As one communicator explained, "We have [multiple] locations now, so I would point that out as a barrier or a challenge, because I am one person" [C35].

Conversely, communicators who previously worked in program roles sometimes have an advantage: they understand how programs operate and already have relationships with staff across the agency. But regardless of where they start, communicators in all settings said they work hard to develop these relationships.

Below are six of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you, to help build strong, productive relationships with program staff.

TACTIC 1: Show Up in Good Times

> ➔ *Show up for program staff consistently — even when nothing is urgent — to build trust and strengthen relationships.*

Communicators emphasized that relationships grow when you are present not only during crises or requests for help: "Showing up in good times as well as bad, on the blue-sky days [helps]" [C17]. Attending events, checking in proactively, and picking up the phone when program teams call may sound simple, but communicators said these behaviors are extremely effective in building rapport.

> *"I think it's just getting to know your coworkers. Just making a point to be available and walking down the hall and talking to people. I mean, that's where a lot of good ideas come from, in these little side conversations."* —C23

> *"I am calling and emailing division heads and the program managers all the time to see what's going on. And I go. I go to events, and once I'm there, and they see the final project, they appreciate it. I'm like, 'All you have to do is tell me.' I enjoy it...And I have to constantly reiterate that to the team."* —C31

## TACTIC 2: Emphasize That Your Job Is to Make Them Look Good

> → *Emphasize that your role is to elevate and support program staff, so they see you as a partner rather than a gatekeeper.*

Communicators noted that trust grows when program staff understand two things:

1. Communicators are genuinely impressed by the programs they support. As one communicator said, "The stuff that goes on here is mind-blowing! Every day, I just uncover another amazing thing that we do." —C32

2. It is in the communications team's best interest to make programs look good! While this may seem obvious to communicators, program staff often need reassurance, especially early in the relationship. In newer relationships, program staff may not yet have faith that you are really working on their behalf, or they might even fear working with communications.

> *"[My perspective is:] 'There's tons of great work happening, so how do we help all the divisions tell their story and brag on the work that they're doing?'"* —C3

> *"[You have to say:] 'I'm not here to tear down the work you're doing. I'm here to support the work you're doing!'... It's just being a human and being supportive of folks and their work, and showing your value, and demonstrating you're not there to tear it down. You're there to really elevate their work...[Saying] 'I'm the conduit to showing off your amazing stuff!'"* —C32
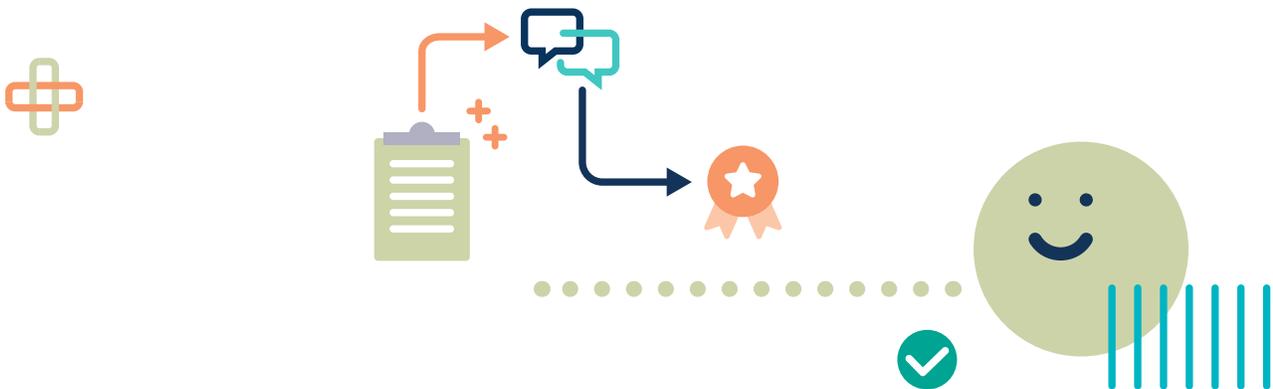
TACTIC 3: Create Systems That Bring Communications in Early

➔ *Build systems and expectations that encourage program staff to involve the communications team at the outset of their work.*

Communicators agreed that they deliver better work when they're brought in at the beginning of a project to develop a collaborative communications strategy. Agencies can support this by creating formal request processes, requiring comms engagement during grant-writing, or having senior leadership set clear expectations that programs loop in communications from the beginning.

"We've trained our people really well to say, 'Bring comms in at the beginning of whatever it is that you're going to do, so that we can understand, and we can give you little tidbits of information and start creating whatever it is that you need going forward.'" —C9

"Our goal is to get you to come to us at the beginning of whatever project it is that you're working on and say, 'This is the problem that I'm trying to solve,' or 'This is the thing that I need to communicate. And because I trust you, PIO, as my thought partner, together we're going to figure out the best way to communicate that thing.'" —C17

Bringing comms in early also strengthens the overall strategy of your communications work and helps deepen relationships with agency leadership. See Chapter 13 for more ideas about how to strengthen your strategic authority and Chapter 9 for more ideas on how to deepen your relationships with leaders.
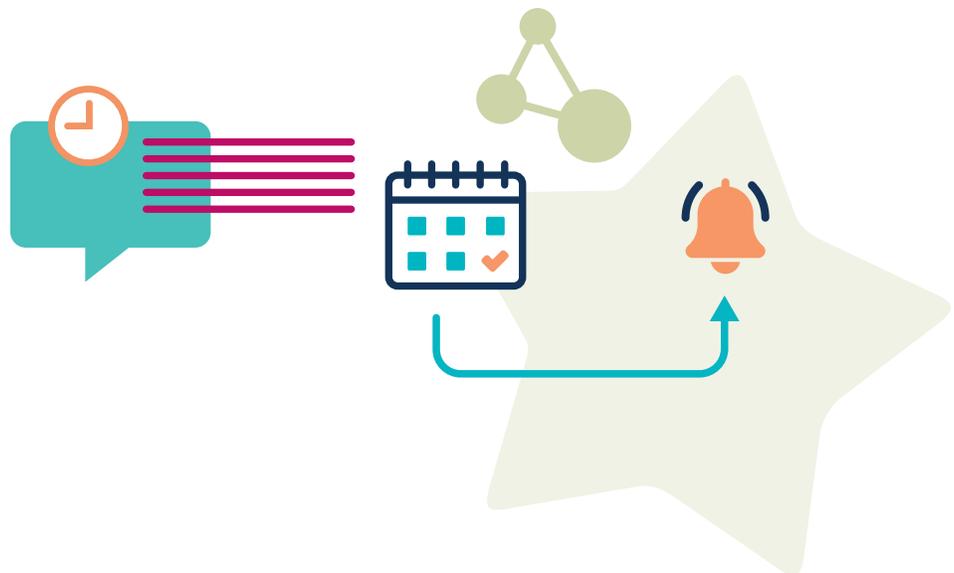
## TACTIC 4: Create Style Guides and Templates — But Keep Them Flexible

→ *Offer accessible style guides, templates, and tools to make it easier for program staff to create early drafts that align with communications expectations.*

Communicators said these resources help program staff start on the right foot and reduce friction in the development process.

"I want to make sure that we are all on the same page, we have the same message, and we are singing from the same sheet of music." —C31

"We have our own communication and education guidebook that I created to just use as a tool for current staff and new staff, something they can reference in the event that they're putting together some information for a [simple] outreach event or something." —C26
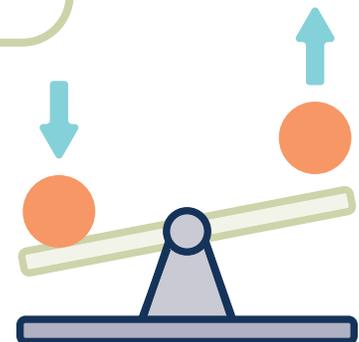
At the same time, inflexible tools can frustrate program staff and jeopardize trust in the relationship. Communicators emphasized that when using these guides, you should reference them while also listening closely to program staff about what will work best. This flexibility helps you adapt as needed and ensures program staff feel heard. The balance can be tricky, but it pays off.

"We really try to be partners with the programs and not... coming in, waving the red pen like, 'Oh this is wrong!'...We have policies, and we have a style guide. We have things we try to do in a very consistent way. But we also need to realize that sometimes you have to deviate from that, and you have to look at the bigger picture. We have to work with everybody in the department, so relationships are important too. So that is a key thing. We try to be very responsive." —C4

"I think back to the balance for comms folks: it's a lot about relationship-building, building trust with the subject matter experts. A willingness to listen, but also — and this is hard for folks, and I get it — having the confidence to really demonstrate your expertise and helping show them that, 'Hey, what you're doing is amazing!'" —C32

TACTIC 5: Assign Comms Points of Contact to Programs

➜ *Create staffing structures that link individual communicators to specific programs or program areas to deepen relationships and streamline collaboration.*

While all departments with multiple staff were centralized, with a comms team providing cross-cutting skills rather than embedding staff in each program, many communicators said it was effective to "assign" individual comms team members to specific programs. Even if a comms staff member specializes in a specific skill, like graphics design or social media, they can also serve as the point person for a specific program.

As the designated point person, they meet regularly with program staff, lead communications efforts for that program, and bring in other comms teammates as needed. Communicators said this consistent connection builds trust and strengthens collaboration by giving the comms team a deeper understanding of the program's work.

If program assignments don't work for your department, or if you are a department of one, then asking for comms representatives from each program can be another way to make these structured linkages. In addition to their other responsibilities, this program staff member can serve as a communications liaison: attending comms meetings, coordinating materials, and helping lead communications efforts for their program. Involving program staff in this way strengthens their communications skills and gives your team better insight into program activities, allowing you to develop more effective strategies to support them.

> *"I think that's one thing that I've talked with my team about, is 'How we can be the connection point between things?' So, if different people on my team are supporting different programs, and we're talking within our team about what each other is doing, we can see some potential for overlap or partnership, and then we can help the programs then connect with each other."* —C10

> *"[I've tried] to reinforce that our brand isn't just our logo or the colors that we use. Our brand is how people perceive us, how people think about us, and the service or interactions they have with us...And we bring that to our outreach team. I'll usually meet with them about once a month or so, about really making sure that the way we're talking to people, the way we're approaching people, is in line with our broader brand around approachability."* —C25

> *"We built what we call the Communications Ambassadors Group...We asked each of our sections and our branches to identify somebody who didn't have to have communications in their title, but just somebody who could come to an ambassador meeting and have a conversation with us and let us know what's happening in their section, and with their work. And then we can collaborate a little bit more."* —C8

TACTIC 6: Use Technology to Collaborate More Effectively

➜ *Leverage collaborative technologies to streamline materials development and strengthen day-to-day teamwork with program staff.*

Because communicators often need to develop materials quickly and collaborate across multiple worksites, tools that allow easy sharing and joint editing can significantly improve both your process and relationships. While platforms like Zoom to Teams are now nearly universal, many communicators said design-specific tools such as Canva were especially valuable for building effective working relationships between comms and program staff.

"Hands down, I could not do my job effectively without it [a paid subscription to Canva]...You can collaborate on it, and just having the access to different graphics and making it so that it's pleasing to the eye and not everything looks exactly the same...I can just send a link to the people in my division that do the translating, and they can log right on, and it eases the transition a lot, and we're able to do it a lot quicker." —C18

"Being able to bounce things back and forth and being able to share through a platform where we can all edit is a big one...So we try and make sure we're using the Canva, and everyone has access to it...And we found that that's what's worked best for our agency specifically." —C16

STEP 1

Assessing Relationships with Programs

The quality of relationships between your comms team/department and programs, divisions, or departments within your agency
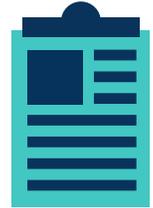
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 10 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider your relationships with programs, as well as relationships between your immediate team and programs (if applicable). . This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What has been challenging about creating or sustaining relationships with programs?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your/your team's current relationships with programs?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to grow your/your team's relationships with programs? *(Select at least one: Show Up in Good Times, Emphasize That Your Job Is to Make Them Look Good, Create Systems That Bring Communications in Early or related tactics from Chapter 9 and Chapter 13, Create Style Guides and Templates — But Keep Them Flexible, Assign Comms Points of Contact to Programs, Use Technology to Collaborate More Effectively)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed relationships with programs and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 11: Relationships Among Comms Staff

I. HOW RELATIONSHIPS AMONG COMMS STAFF IMPACT COMMUNICATIONS
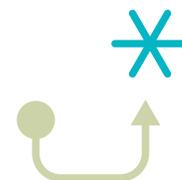
How do stronger relationships among comms staff impact communications?

Communicators who were part of a communications team (i.e., communications departments comprised of more than one staff member) said that strong relationships with other comms staff were essential to the success of their work, department morale, and their own personal satisfaction. At the most practical level, positive relationships allow the team to leverage the full range of skills and insights of the group efficiently. There is often a mix of specialties on the team, from videography to story writing to press response, even if staff do not handle tasks exclusively. When relationships are strong, teams draw on these complementary strengths and maintain clear roles, which helps everyone understand what needs to be done.

Strong relationships also support satisfaction and resilience. When everyone feels they have an opportunity to provide input and that their contributions are valued, they are more willing to take on the inevitable challenges and tight deadlines that come with public health communications. At an even more personal level, having team members — including bosses — who are understanding of work/life needs and will cover each other when needed makes communicators happy to come to work.

"I feel like I am the luckiest communications chick ever. We have such a great team, and they are always engaged...[A few months ago] we had to get really pertinent, timely information up on our social media, up on our website. It was a Saturday afternoon, and I texted them and said, 'Hey, we got to do this. Sorry. I know it's Saturday.' Nope. They were [like], 'Done, done!' We don't have drama. Everyone...just does the work, does it well...It's a great working relationship, and we each have our own roles, so we know [what to do]." —C9

"Another piece that's been really fun over the last few years is cultivating my team...helping them build skills, and also helping build the team, so that even though they have different lanes, they can bounce things off of each other. They support each other, and they're helping build up each other's skills." —C10

## How do weaker relationships among comms staff impact communications?

Few communicators said their current teams did not work well together, but several noted that they transferred from other departments that don't function well. In a few cases, communicators noted that this stemmed from situations where certain team members had fewer skills to offer or were less competent overall. This put an extra burden on other communicators to carry the work alone and slowed down collaboration, making it harder to get things done at all, let alone get them done well. In other cases, external circumstances have caused disruptions to otherwise well-functioning teams.

"There's [a] lack of communication…We do [have meetings], but they're so inconsistent…My boss is personally going through some health problems, so that happening has made a lot of people a lot less accountable. Because if my boss isn't in office: 'Why do I need to be in office?' and 'I can pick and choose the days I'm in', and 'Oh, if the boss is on Teams, even though I'm in office, I can be on Teams when everyone else is in the conference room' and stuff like that. So, I just feel like there's a lot less accountability…making [it] more difficult to do the job." —C1

II. HOW TO ENHANCE RELATIONSHIPS AMONG COMMS STAFF

Communicators shared several strategies for cultivating relationships among comms team members. While some approaches may be more feasible for senior staff who have greater control over hiring and operations, there are nonetheless ways that anyone on the comms team can try to encourage these practices and build relationships.

Below are four of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you to enhance relationships on your teams.
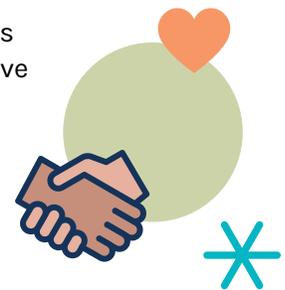
TACTIC 1: Ensure Everyone Has a Say

➜ *Create an environment where all team members have regular opportunities to share ideas, contribute their skills, and shape projects.*

Getting everyone's input on a project leverages different perspectives and skills. It also makes comms teams members feel valued and want to try harder, which can improve their results. You can intentionally create opportunities for comms staff to give input as the first step, and over time this helps reinforce a more inclusive culture and collaborative habits.

"I try to create an environment where everybody has the option or the opportunity to give their feedback or input about whatever we're doing." —C9

"Where we shine is when we all put our heads together on an initiative and make it happen…even with only four people, I think we're kind of small but mighty." —C2

TACTIC 2: Meet Regularly

> → *Schedule meetings intentionally, rather than relying on comms staff to connect independently, to ensure better connections.*

It may sound basic, but having regularly scheduled meetings can be an important tactic to bring comms staff together in busy environments. Ensuring that communicators have predictable times when you come together and talk about your work, share ideas, and brainstorm helps comms staff plan their work and motivates participation — especially in the context of a larger culture that welcomes input from everyone (see Tactic 1).

"We have a weekly production meeting with the video production team, and we have a weekly all-communications…That way, they're able to coordinate who's sending out press releases what day, to make sure we're not stepping on each other's toes…And in the production team meeting, we're able to just brainstorm ideas and let them know about events we have coming up, and [see] if they're able to get pictures or video at events." —C7

"Regular communication and touch[ing] base amongst our team, that's definitely a key thing…They're meeting, and they're coordinating, so that they know that they're making those connections. So, 'Yep, there's a press release going to go out on this date', making sure that the social media team is aware, so that once it's posted, we can share that. If there's additional assets that are needed, that those have been created and are ready to go. So, a lot of that is just taking the information and then making those connections amongst the various teams that we have." —C30

TACTIC 3: Be in the Same Room

→ *Create some in-office time together.*

Being together in the same space can foster better communication, both because staff are more likely to interact when they are physically close and because it helps prevent the miscommunication that can happen on written platforms. As one communicator explained: "I like having everybody here because they're within arm's length of each other, so then I don't have to interpret a weird email or a text" [C38]. Being together in-person also fosters more inclusive meetings and serendipity, as it allows staff to discuss projects and strategize together informally.

"They have an open concept at the communications office. So if something comes up, everyone's always open to just like pop in meetings or talking through issues. Not even with scheduled meetings, just problem solving and talking through what's going on a daily basis." —C7

"You can work up to two days a week remote. But normally, I just do one day...I like it better when we're all there because, even though you just have to pick up the phone to call somebody or Webex or Zoom with them, it just makes it so much better to do it in person. I like the days when we're all there at the same time." —C22

TACTIC 4: Cross-Train

➜ *Ensure that team members have basic skills across different areas of communications.*

When comms team members share basic skills across different areas of communications — like videography, social media, press response, and graphic design — they can rely on each other when someone is out of the office or when workloads are high. Being able to count on team members and know that the work will not fall solely on their shoulders can reduce comms staff's anxiety, which matters in positions that are already fast-paced and high-stress. Cross-training does not mean that staff members lose their areas of expertise or control over specific tasks. Instead, it creates back-up and offers opportunities for professional development, improving comms effectiveness in both the short-run and the long-run.

 "We cross-train people, and then we have them [still have] stuff that they're responsible for. But if somebody's out, then they can easily step in and fill in. [Our PIO], she's actually on leave this afternoon. So I'm going to fill in for [a reported case of an infectious illness] and any media requests. We really are a closely-grouped-together team, and everybody works really well together. If we didn't have that, I think it would be problematic." —C40

 "The other nice part with our [team] is we support each other. So, if I'm gone for a week, I know my supervisor is going to jump in and take care of what I need to do during that week. Or if she's gone, we each kind of divvy up her position as it aligns with our positions. Or if our web content developer is gone, then we'll jump in and help there. So, we all know each other's roles and we all can jump in and help, but then we stay in our own lane." —C21
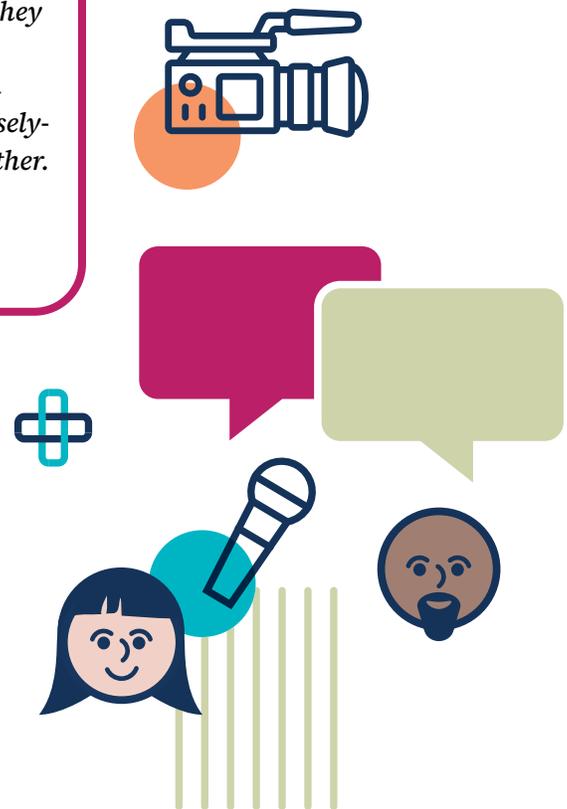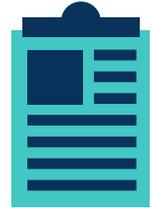
STEP 1

Assessing Relationships Among Comms Staff

The quality of relationships among comms staff (if there is more than one person on the team or in your department)

This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 11 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider relationships among comms staff within your team. This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What has been challenging about creating or sustaining relationships among comms staff?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your current relationships among comms staff?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to grow relationships among comms staff? *(Select at least one: Ensure Everyone Has a Say, Meet Regularly, Be in the Same Room, Cross-Train)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed relationships among comms staff and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 12: Relationships with the Media

I. HOW RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA IMPACT COMMUNICATIONS

How do stronger relationships with the media impact communications?

Communicators agreed that traditional media, including earned and paid sources, remains a critical piece of communications for public health agencies, even in the era of social media. Stronger relationships with reporters and outlets allow communicators to tell their stories more effectively, clarify facts, and provide the public with information that supports healthier decisions for themselves and their communities. Moreover, communicators note that strong relationships with the media help can help minimize unfair or inaccurately negative coverage and protect trust in public health agencies.

"The media has changed quite a bit. There were many reporters that I used to work with in the past who are no longer around, either because they retired or they lost their jobs…but there are still some that I have known for many years. And that helps." —C42

"There's not that many health reporters any longer. Most reporters are pretty much Jacks and Jills of all trades because they have to be. It's a different kind of world out there now in the media." —C30

At the same time, nurturing these relationships is increasingly challenging. There are fewer staff reporters, which means fewer opportunities to build connections and more contacts to keep track of. There are also fewer reporters who are deeply knowledgeable about public health, creating a greater need to educate reporters than in the past. Still, communicators emphasized that strong relationships are possible and incredibly helpful.

How do weaker relationships with the media impact communications?

When communications teams have weaker relationships with the media, it becomes harder to get messages out effectively to the communities they serve. Further, it risks the media publishing stories that lack a public health lens, spread misinformation, or erode trust in public health agencies and public health more broadly.

Some communicators felt their relationships with the media were particularly strained. They were not only navigating a fractured media landscape with fewer and less knowledgeable reporters, but also facing an increasingly politicized and hostile environment marked by the rise of "gotcha journalism" [C30]. This shift can be disheartening and even frightening as public health agencies try to remain neutral, despite reporters' questions leaning more political: "There are new outlets that are rising up that are aligned with [political] beliefs, who are asking us very hard questions about gender identity and being really aggressive about young people that is kind of concerning, to the extent that I sometimes think they're trying to find these people and out them" [C6].

"At a time when traditional media is struggling in so many parts of [my] state, so fragmented, reaches fewer and fewer people...the big gap for us right now is...the ability to tell our story directly...[so we] do that through paid media." —C5.

These dynamics make it simultaneously more challenging and more important to build media relationships wherever possible. For some communicators, however, the environment is so difficult that they try to rely less on traditional media altogether, supplementing with paid media when resources allow and strengthening their online and social media presence. (See Chapter 14 for more ideas about how to use technology to enhance digital and social media communications.)

"As media is becoming more fragmented — it's crazy...I've been working in the field for 15 years, and how I used to live and die by a bad media story is completely different now. A bad headline would destroy me in the beginning...[Now] people have so much access to news that not only the bad headline, but my megaphone has shifted and gotten smaller, and so we need to be more thoughtful on the other ways that we're reaching people." —C17

II. HOW TO STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MEDIA

Some communicators felt they had advantages when building relationships with media. Former journalists, for example, described leaning on their knowledge of reporters' needs and existing professional relationships. (See Chapter 6 for more ideas about how to develop your staff's backgrounds, experience, and training.) Others felt they benefitted from mediagenic senior leadership who were receptive to guidance about being responsive to media inquiries. Regardless of their starting point, all felt that strengthening relationships with media outlets is essential to effective public health communications, and they made intentional efforts to nurture those connections.

Below are three of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.
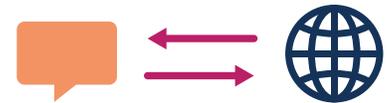
TACTIC 1: Be a Good Partner

→ *Be available for reporters, be honest when you talk with them, and reach out consistently.*

At its core, strengthening your relationship with the media means being a good partner. Picking up the phone when they call and replying quickly to reporters' emails or texts is the basic foundation of these relationships. Even if you cannot fully answer their questions right away, it is important to acknowledge that you are on the case! When you speak with them, being honest and transparent helps build rapport and reduces the likelihood of "gotcha" journalism tactics. Finally, developing a media list for distributing press releases and updates can help you stay in regular contact and keep you on reporters' radars.

"We actually have a great relationship with our media partners...We've established such a good relationship with them that if I email them and say, 'Hey! Could you send your guy over and just get a little bit on this [issue]?', they say 'Yes'... So us saying yes has led to them always saying yes." —C34

"Don't be afraid to talk to the press...It's hard, and it is scary, but there's so much value in just telling them what you're doing. And if they find out something bad happened, tell them you're fixing it." —C6

TACTIC 2: Reduce Media Fears & Provide Internal Training

➜ *Help colleagues gain confidence when interacting with reporters.*

Often public health staff — even those on the comms team — can be nervous or "freaked out" [C36] when working with the press. As a result, they may avoid opportunities, delay replies, or be less helpful in interviews, which weakens your relationships with reporters. To avoid that or turn the situation around, it can be helpful to provide media training to SMEs or program staff proactively. In addition, coaching senior leadership or other staff before they talk with reporters can pay huge dividends. If SMEs get too uncomfortable or things get delayed, however, you may need to be prepared to be the backup in order to keep things steady with your reporter relationships.

"Right now, my comms folks who are program-specific, they don't have PIO backgrounds. They don't have media background[s]. They're writing press releases and talking points, and so it takes some coaching." —C10

"When I first came here, [the health department] was very scared of the media, very — which I was surprised by...And the lens was more like, 'I'm only going to do an interview...if it's valuable to me,' versus seeing the need to build that relationship with journalists over time." —C49

TACTIC 3: Complement Traditional Media Relationships

➜ *Use social media and other outreach efforts to strengthen your traditional media approaches.*

In an increasingly fractured and politicized media environment rife with misinformation, you already know that you need to complement traditional media approaches with a strong online and social media presence, paid media, and other outreach opportunities. While these functions may sit with different staff on larger teams, focusing on ways that these tools play well together and build on each other can be especially helpful. See Chapter 14 for more ideas about how to enhance social media functions.

"We need to be thoughtful about how we're reaching people directly...[so our approach is to use] video creation [and] more grassroots. I think the line between strictly public information and community engagement is becoming blurred, and we're really looking for people with skills who understand how to reach people. And then the second part of that is how to make sure that the message is resonating with the people you're reaching." —C17

"[We had] a social media influencer strategy during the pandemic. That was our primary strategy for conservative communities, and I think it was effective." —C5

STEP 1

Assessing Relationships with the Media

The quality of relationships between your comms department and the media relevant for the communities you serve

This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 12 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider your relationships with the media and relationships that your team has with the media (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What have been the challenges in creating or sustaining relationships with the media?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your current relationships with the media?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to grow your/your team's relationships with the media? *(Select at least one: Be a Good Partner, Reduce Media Fears & Provide Internal Training, Complement Traditional Media Relationships or related tactics from Chapter 14)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed relationships with the media and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 13: Strategic Authority

I. HOW STRATEGIC AUTHORITY IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

### How does greater strategic authority impact communications?

Communicators described strategic authority as the ability to develop communications from a strategic perspective, rather than from a reflexive one. Communicators with strategic authority can develop communications materials as part of an overarching plan that accounts for key audiences, utilizes tailored messaging, incorporates trusted messengers, and leverages multiple materials and platforms. Communicators emphasized that having more strategic authority is not a reflection of the comms staff's talents and abilities, but is instead a function of the policies and culture within their agency.

When communicators have strategic authority, they can create effective communications for individual programs and develop a cohesive, organization-wide approach. Building the broader, organization-wide brand ensures programs' materials and messaging have a cohesive look and feel, which better positions the agency to communicate effectively.

"I feel like we made a big push in the last two or three years to really be on that strategic end of things…[W]e have to be very conscious about when we are putting communications out and what that communication looks like, how we're putting it out, how we're going to reach the folks that we need it to reach, and is it serving our purpose, our mission, our values — all of that." —C45

"So right now, we are building out a suite of key messaging. And the real goal there is so that everyone is speaking with the same voice. So, if you're in the field and are talking about long COVID, you're using the same key messages as the press office is with the media…[We] try to really centralize our messaging and ensure there's agency consistency on how we talk about issues." —C32
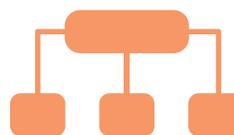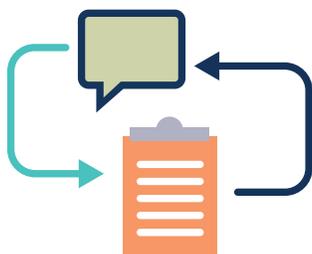
Communicators also stressed that strategic authority requires both formal supports — such as job titles, organizational positioning, and official procedures (e.g., requirements that social posts go through comms) — and informal supports, including culture, norms, and general practices of the organization. They emphasized that formal support is often not enough. Even communicators with communications-specific titles and leadership roles noted that they still need to work patiently with program staff to shift expectations and practices. Program staff often think about communications only at the end of their process or only briefly, viewing it as "just" a flyer or social media post, rather than a strategic function. Moreover, if program staff do not consider communications central to their mission, then it can be "a bit challenging trying to get people within the department engaged in doing [what feels like] extra work" [C31].

How does having less strategic authority impact communications?

Communicators with less strategic authority are often forced to take a reactive approach, developing materials without the benefit of a larger strategy. They are frequently brought in late to the game and expected to follow the directive of programs' requests, including one-off materials. As one communicator said, "So [when] somebody comes to us and says, 'Hey, we need a flyer!', that's the worst thing. That makes our ears bleed" [C17].

A less strategic process naturally reduces the effectiveness of the materials communicators can produce and constrains their ability to support the organization more broadly. In turn, these experiences reduce morale among comms staff and increase frustration with the work.

"Sometimes that's really hard for people, and they're like, 'Oh, we just always do a press release', and I pushed them to think about, 'Okay, well, who's the audience? What are we trying to get them to do?' — true communications planning and strategy." —C8

"We get…thrust into this role a lot: line cook. [Programs are] like, 'Take an order! Our program wants a news release. Crank out a news release for us.' I do not see that as our job. Our job is more strategic… They're going to get a news release if it's part of their communications plan." —C5

"I think comms, for a lot of people…is an afterthought. They say, 'Okay, we're going to create this great program. Yay!' And then we get to two days before they're going to launch it, and [they] say, 'Oh, how are people going to know about it? I guess we should bring in comms.'" —C9

"We can't even talk about flyers here. I will literally scream. I'll be like, 'How many flyers are we littering the city with? Because I need to know!' But people were really dug in. And each division worked really separately…publications, social media, marketing. And there was no synergy between our messaging, what we were saying, our look and feel. We have no brand book and no colors … I want someone to look at something and be like: 'Oh, that's the health department. They're a trusted messenger on vaccines. I understand what they're saying to me. It's accessible. It's in multiple languages. I can read it.'" —C32

II. HOW TO INCREASE STRATEGIC AUTHORITY

Communicators explained that increasing and maintaining strategic authority is an on-going process because it depends on both formal resources, such as job titles and official procedures, and informal resources, such as support from organizational leadership. Many communicators viewed strategic authority as the ultimate tool for effective communications — and a critical piece for their own job satisfaction — so they invested significant effort in growing it, even if the process was slow-going and unevenly paced.

Below are six of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you to increase your strategic authority.

TACTIC 1: Encourage Programs to Bring Comms in Early

➜ *Use whatever means you can — whether through formal procedures or frequent conversation — to ensure comms is involved early in developing materials.*

Ensuring that programs bring the comms team in early to the materials development process is essential for strengthening strategic authority. Early involvement helps ensure you have time to learn about programs' goals, and then helps programs think through options for materials, messaging, and platforms. This naturally leads to more effective materials, and it prevents frustration when communicators see content only at the end and must request changes or delay releases. As one communicator explained, "That doesn't feel good when [program staff are] like, 'I've spent weeks preparing this, and today was the day it was supposed to go out, and you're telling me no.' It's not fun" [C3].

Tactics to ensure communicators are brought in early may be formal procedures, communications request forms, or — particularly in smaller organizations — a general expectation that communicators are part of initial conversations at the program-level and involved in frequent conversations along the way.

"So, we've trained our people really well to say, 'Bring comms in at the beginning of whatever it is that you're going to do, so that we can understand, and we can give you little tidbits of information and start creating whatever it is that you need going forward.'" —C9

"One struggle I've had is getting people to think about communications early in the process of developing programs, rather than bringing in me at the last stage... like: 'Hey, we're rolling this thing out.' 'Oh, well, I have questions about how this works and how this decision was made. And why did you do it this way? Did you talk to this group? Was this group at the table? Were they involved? Oh, they weren't involved. Oh, it's a little awkward to bring them in now.'" —C49

TACTIC 2: Develop a Strategic Plan

➜ *Even if no one else is on board yet, develop a strategic plan that organizes messaging and style across your agency.*

A strategic plan helps bring coherence to communications across an organization. In larger organizations, formal strategic planning with outside consultants can be very helpful. But, even without those resources, organizing your own thinking around communications can be an important tool. Communicators described building strategic plans, even if they did not (yet!) have authority to carry them out across their agencies. Developing underlying frameworks and messaging can reinforce the work of each program. Further, developing a plan for how you want your own work to grow and support your strategic vision can be a guiding north star in the hectic pace of daily operations.

"We've started some narrative structure writing. So it's the ABT narrative structure…by Randy Olson…We want to set clear messages that end up in everything that we do…We want to come up with taglines and one-liners that just show up everywhere, that can be in every news spot…We're starting an expedition of rebuilding trust and buy-in with the public, and it's just going to take some time, but we need that message." —C28

"That's actually something we've been working on longer term: being more proactive. We've built out a communications plan [for the next year]. It includes information about how we want to expand the video team, how we want to expand social media." —C6

TACTIC 3: Create a Calendar

➜ *Block predictable events for the year and try to organize programs around that timeline.*

A pre-set calendar is a useful tool for fostering your strategic authority, because it helps programs plan ahead and think strategically about communications. You can begin by planning for predictable events during the year, such as seasonal issues (e.g., respiratory virus season or hot season) or awareness events, like Breast Cancer Awareness Month or National HIV Testing Day. In addition, meeting with program staff to review this calendar and help them prepare can give greater strategic focus to the work. It provides everyone with a shared understanding of communications timelines while reserving space for the inevitable or unpredictable events or crises of public health.

"One of the things I've been trying to do is get us more towards a proactive, campaign-based approach that we can plan for ahead of time. We know it's going to be hot, and we're going to be doing heat comms every summer, for example. I would like to have as much of that as possible already set and prepped before it starts getting warm, because we know it's coming. We have the same prevention tips and warnings every year." —C10

"For each month, we do have a plan where we've got a couple of observances that we do. For March, it's National Nutrition Month, Colorectal Cancer Month, and Women's History Month. So those three things drive probably 70% of our content and messaging for the month. And then after we get those in, then we fill in with our biggest programs...and then we fill in with all of those other [smaller programs and events]." —C34

TACTIC 4: Develop Clear Procedures for Communications Requests

→ *Create clear processes for how programs request communications support.*

Whether you are able to develop a calendar system or you need to live with a more reflexive workflow, it is important to have clear procedures for communications requests — such as planning meetings or simple forms for one-off requests. Clear processes can help you grow strategic authority in two ways. First, they encourage programs to build the necessary time for communications into their process. Second, if these procedures require programs to reflect on their needs, they can encourage a more strategic and intentional development process for outputs. Over time, these procedures help create a habit and culture of strategic consideration for communications.

"Before the grant cycle starts or before the fiscal year starts, I typically sit down with each division or grant coordinator, and we develop a marketing plan for that period...Knowing the work environment and the work that we do, things come up...And so when things that aren't defined in our planning are needed, that's where a ticket system can come in for us....I would say like 80% of it is planned, and 20% comes through tickets." —C26

"We've created a template for folks to use when they... want to [develop materials.] [It asks questions so we can] figure out the why and what do you want to get from it. Because, you know, a press release may not be the way that we do that. We might need to do it a different way." —C8
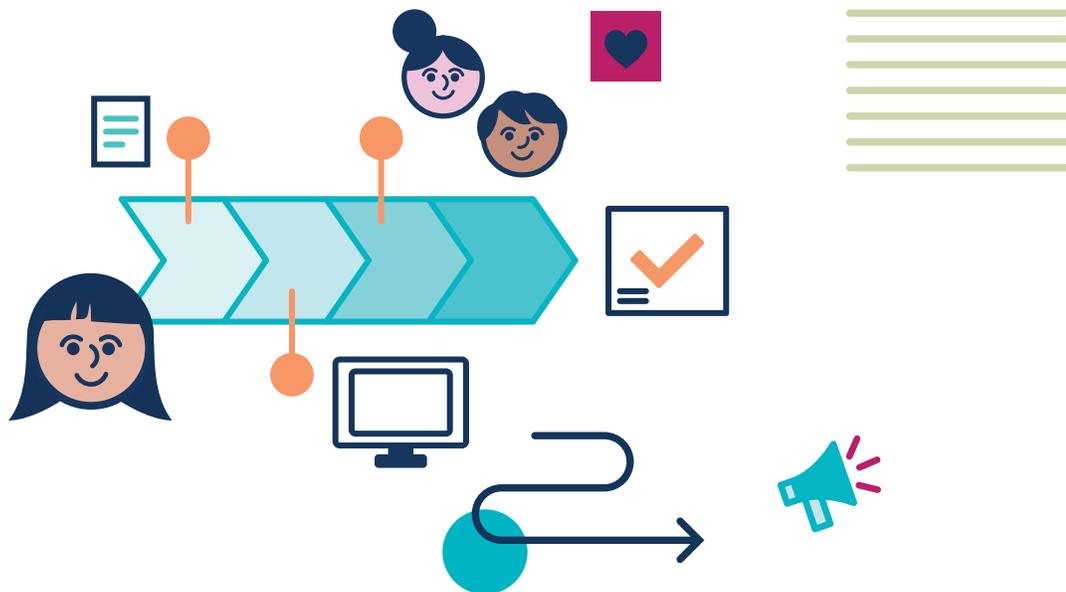
TACTIC 5: Ensure You Have Strong Relationships with Programs

➜ *Strengthen your relationships with programs to support every other tactic on this list!*

Strategic authority often comes down to whether program staff are willing to share their vision with you and invite your input in a meaningful way. This requires strong relationships, built on trust that communicators understand program goals, they have programs' best interests in mind, and they can deliver effective, high-quality materials. See Chapter 10 for ideas about how to strengthen your relationships with programs.
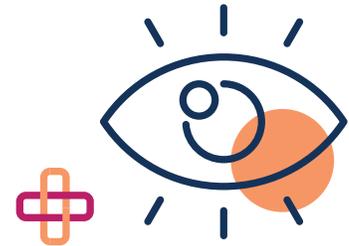
TACTIC 6: Get Support from Leadership

➜ *Build strong relationships with your agency leadership to reinforce your authority with programs and external stakeholders.*

Strong relationships with your organization's senior leadership are critical for advancing almost every tactic in this chapter. When leadership understands and trusts your expertise, they are more likely to signal to the rest of the organization (and to external partners), that communicators must be engaged early and often. This relationship also allows you to do the behind-the-scenes work needed with leadership to shape your organization's broader strategic direction. A solid relationship is particularly important when you need to work through challenges, like being "disciplined, rigorous, [and] saying no to a lot of things" [C5] in order to prioritize the larger mission of your organization. See Chapter 9 for ideas about how to strengthen relationships with leadership and build a foundation for the support you need.
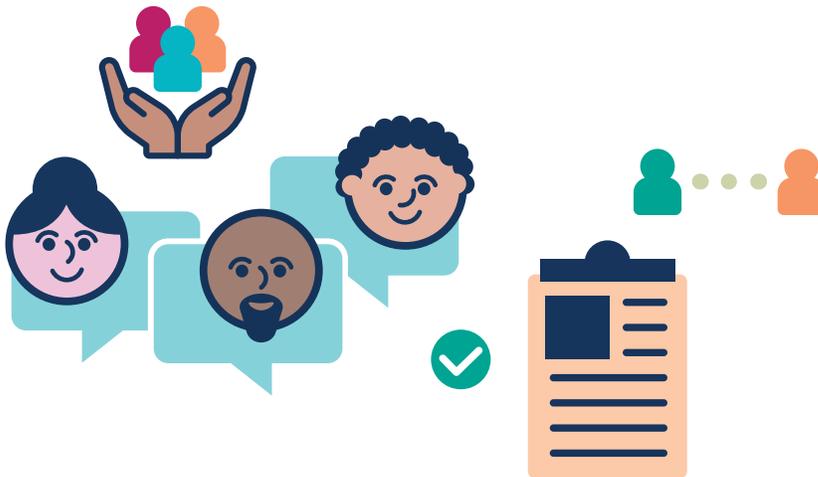
STEP 1

Assessing Strategic Authority

The degree to which your comms team/department has the ability to develop communications from a strategic perspective, rather than from a reflexive one
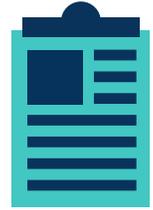
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 13 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider your own strategic authority as well as that of your team (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What has been most challenging about creating or sustaining your/your team's strategic authority?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your/your team's current strategic authority?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to increase your/your team's strategic authority? (*Select at least one: Encourage Programs to Bring Comms in Early, Develop a Strategic Plan, Create a Calendar, Develop Clear Procedures for Communications Requests, Ensure You Have Strong Relationships with Programs or related tactics from Chapter 10, Get Support from Leadership or related tactics from Chapter 9*)	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed strategic authority and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Chapter 14: Technological Sophistication

I. HOW TECH SOPHISTICATION IMPACTS COMMUNICATIONS

How does greater tech sophistication impact communications?

Communicators described a variety of ways in which greater tech sophistication — including more technologies and a savvier, dedicated workforce — helped them build more effective internal and external communications. For external communications, greater tech sophistication allowed agencies to establish a broader and more effective online presence through digital and social media. Tools like Sprout Social and Hootsuite helped communicators manage social media calendars and schedules across the agency, facilitating strategic integration of communications efforts. For social media management specifically, communicators said that technology made it easier to design more sophisticated strategies and build stronger connections with the communities they serve. For internal communications, platforms like Canva facilitated collaboration quickly and easily, while others like Microsoft Teams made it "so easy to have a conversation" [C50].

"I would say, in the last four to five years, we've really focused a lot on our communication, building our platforms. We have Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, and now we just have joined LinkedIn. So I would say the majority seems to be on social media and website updates." —C22

"Social media...was a big first step [for us]...especially during COVID, where everything needed to be online. So we were able to utilize Facebook and Instagram and get those messages out, and you can literally see our pages have these huge jumps with every crisis that has happened...So [I recommend] creating those pages, creating your Canva page (I highly recommend a paid one), [and] the scheduling app." —C18

Although communicators did not frequently mention using artificial intelligence (AI), several said they were trying to embrace it — with mixed feelings. They hoped AI could help them do their job more efficiently and recognized that its use in communications is likely inevitable, so they wanted to be prepared. At the same time, they worried about legal issues. Because many agencies do not yet have policies on AI use, communicators said they were navigating uncharted waters with the hopes that the potential benefits of using AI would ultimately outweigh the risks.

"AI is the future. AI is going to make the flyer for me...[So] people need to learn AI, but we also need to incorporate policy on AI, and that's going to involve the legal department. And I can see the legal department completely shutting that down.... [I'd rather] ask forgiveness...I'm doing training [on] how to use AI responsibly. [I'm] not an expert by all means. I wish I knew more, but again, [in the field of] health education, we make presentations. We go out in the community and do education. AI can make a freaking PowerPoint." —C20

How does less tech sophistication impact communications?

Many communicators described working in agencies with limited tech sophistication and the frustrations this created for getting messages out effectively. Often, less tech sophistication stemmed primarily from a technologically-challenged workforce. Many staff lacked training, and older members of the public health workforce were often described as being uncomfortable with technology and hesitant to participate in training.

"Honestly, a lot of our internal struggles come from generational differences in terms of even just using technology." —C17

"I would love to require...training for basic Microsoft Excel. My department is a lot of older individuals who have been doing things a lot of older ways. And we are moving in a very technologically advanced world." —C37
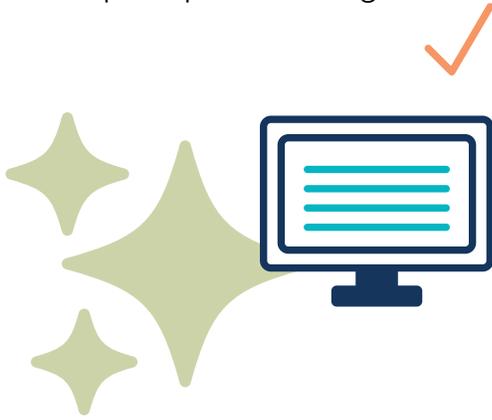
Even in agencies with a younger or more tech-eager workforce, communicators were often still hampered by limited equipment or outdated tools. Many shared challenges including limited funds for better recording equipment, editing software, or other basic resources needed for modern communication. Beyond limited funding, some pointed to a lack of senior leadership support for investing in these tools.
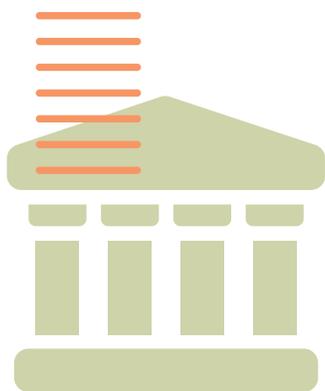
"We have had some training on video production and editing. Not my strong suit...We're inhibited by some of the equipment we have, especially as we're trying to do more with podcasting, with videos, with social media outreach." —C24

"I would love to have someone that could help with videography, or if nothing else, then [editing] software that could help me with it....I have an old iPhone. As the PIO, I'm taking photos and videos on my personal phone because my work phone is useless...And we do have a chief administrative officer who is extremely old school and doesn't see the value in technology...We're way behind the times." —C44

Finally, communicators were sometimes constrained by government bureaucracies and political considerations that shaped how they could use technology. Many noted restrictions on social media accounts or engaging with the community using these accounts. Further, organizations' rules varied widely, creating difficulties as administrations changed, adding strain to the relationship between the comms department and their health agencies.

"We don't even have our own LinkedIn page...We go through [our public health agency], and we fight for face time with everybody else...[The secretary] came in with a vision of 'We're all one'...and so there's one Facebook, one Instagram, one LinkedIn, one whatever...which has made my work a little bit harder." —C8

"[Each] administration has a different perception on...who they want to be communicating about what kind of things." —C17

II. HOW TO EXPAND YOUR TECH SOPHISTICATION

Communicators shared several ideas for addressing their organizations' technology gaps and overcoming related challenges. Below are four of the most common and effective approaches they recommend for communicators like you.

TACTIC 1: See What's Out There and Experiment

➔ *Explore newer tech tools — sometimes free — to help expand your reach.*

Even communicators in departments with just one staff member described how digital tools expanded their reach and made their workload more efficient. Platforms such as Canva, Sprout Social, and Hootsuite were often mentioned as ways to help organize content, streamline output, and manage relationships with program staff.

Communicators also mentioned leaning on external advocacy groups and partner organizations to access training and stay current to the tech landscape.

"Each of the PIOs meet regularly with their program areas and generate social media content. We use a content management system [Sprout Social]...It's a calendaring tool; it also can be a listening tool and a reporting tool." —C17

"I've gotten almost all of the staff onto Canva and using that, so that I have oversight over more at one time in one place. So I'm not chasing down six PDF versions of a flyer that's getting made. I can just pull it up on Canva and be like, 'Oh, we need to change this or that.' So that's been super helpful. We have the brand built into that Canva account. So all of our logos are in there, our colors, our fonts, which is, I think, one of the most beneficial things for me as a single person doing comms." —C45

TACTIC 2: Get Additional Training on AI

➔ *Build a basic understanding of how AI can support your work.*

Many communicators believe that understanding AI tools — including chatbots like ChatGPT, AI creation tools in programs like Canva, and AI-embedded tools like Google's AI Overview and Microsoft Copilot — will be essential for the public health workforce of the future. Most of these platforms offer free training, and even introductory skills can help you identify opportunities where AI can streamline your work and where it falls short.

"I'm trying to really get involved with AI. It's obviously going to be the future. The first jobs that AI is going to get rid of is any type of marketing jobs. AI can write social media posts. AI can create websites. AI can write the content you want for the website. AI can make flyers. That's literally what health education does most of the time...I pushed AI real hard [for training] because, again, right now, the exercises they have us do is like, okay, write a social media post for this. It's like, you don't need to teach me how to do that anymore. AI will do it for me." —C20

TACTIC 3: Develop Your Social Media Policies

➜ *Beyond training on social media, create clear expectations and policies for your department's social media use.*

To navigate the social media space more comfortably, you may find it helpful to set more consistent policies, guidelines, expectations, and schedules for your organization's social media posts and engagement. Some communicators, for example, have found that clear policies about responding to comments on social media pages help to neutralize political debates that may pop up. See Chapter 1 for more ideas about setting social media policies to neutralize political debates in the current environment.

Creating policies and procedures that keep expectations clear and the workflow manageable also supports smoother operations. Coordinating your social media comms strategy with your in-person events and services can further strengthen cohesion and long-term branding.

"We do have a centralized web and social media policy. Things get published through Hootsuite on social media, and so my team actually does a review and approves program posting, and there's a governance committee that my team convenes of all program staff that have social media accounts. And, we used to have posting requirements that the program should keep their feeds alive and fresh. What's the point if you're just going to post once a month?" —C5
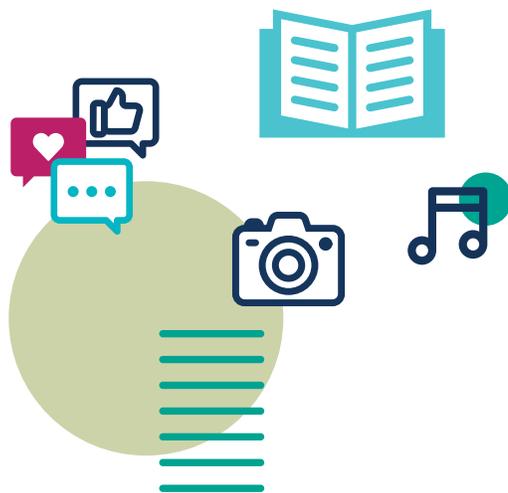
"[For social media] I want to make sure that we are all...singing from the same sheet of music. Our information has to be clear and concise, and whether some feel that they are targeting external partners, really, you're targeting internal partners as well...What has begun to gain traction: I send out notifications pretty often to the team, so they can send me information on any community engagement events that they have coming up, any outreach opportunities, any trainings, workshops, any opportunity where they're connecting with the residents and the clients that we serve. I like to come. I take the pictures. I'll take videos. I'll produce the videos, and that will go on our social media platforms as well." —C31

TACTIC 4: Expand Your Thinking about Social Media

➜ *Consider how new social media platforms and fresh content style can help you extend your reach.*
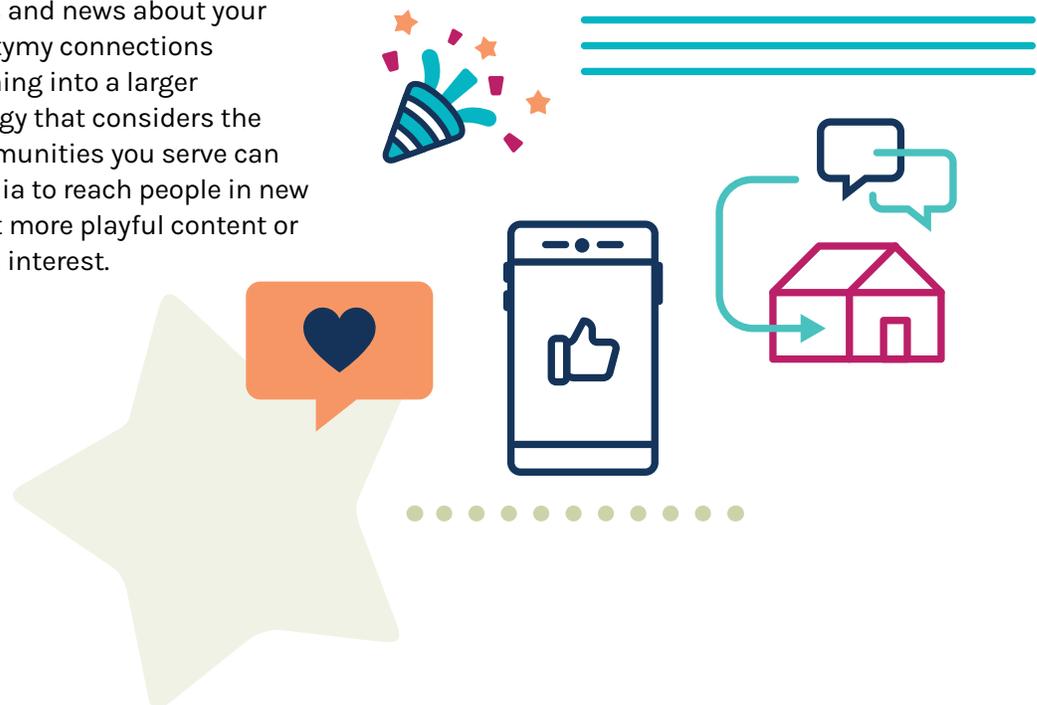
Having a social media presence is an essential part of communication efforts today, but getting the most out of it — and knowing how much effort to invest — remains an ongoing challenge. It can be difficult to leverage common platforms effectively and "compete" for attention, so you may want to explore the broader array of online tools and platforms that can help you connect with your community. For some, this means going beyond standard Facebook, Instagram, and X (Twitter) accounts to other social media spaces, such as Nextdoor.

"I remember very specifically having a conversation with the digital media manager and me telling her, 'Look, I think Nextdoor is not good. I've never had a good experience with it. It feels like it's a bunch of people being mean to each other.' But man, these zip code opportunities are too hard to pass up. We can message directly to folks where we can see they're not getting vaccines. We can message directly to people we know are not getting their RSV shots. So I just essentially said, 'Let's try it. I'm just going to assume that I'm wrong, and it's going to be helpful and hope that it works out that way,' and it did." —C6

"I would like to have a bit more fun on our social media. You know, I think be a bit more engaging with folks, rather than just sort of be like a one-way conversation with people, if that makes sense. So that's one big thing that I've been trying to facilitate." —C2

Sticking strictly to facts and news about your organization can also stymie connections with communities. Leaning into a larger communications strategy that considers the full dimensions of communities you serve can help you use social media to reach people in new ways — like building out more playful content or bite-size tips that spark interest.

STEP 1

Assessing Tech Sophistication

The degree to which your agency has technological infrastructure, and whether staff are comfortable with and ready for managing social media and tech advances like artificial intelligence
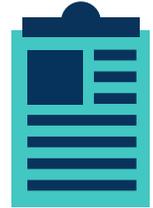
This worksheet is going to help you take the tactics from Chapter 14 and turn them into your own Action Plan. As you reflect on the questions below, consider your own tech sophistication as well as that of your immediate team (if applicable). This can be done as an individual exercise or as a group exercise. Use the space provided to capture, organize, and analyze responses.

QUESTION	RESPONSE
1. What has been most challenging to enhancing or sustaining your/your team's tech sophistication?	
2. What people, approaches, or policies have helped you/your team in working around those challenges?	
3. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 is poor and 10 is excellent, how would you rate your/your team's current tech sophistication?	
4. Which activities (tactics) from this chapter would you like to try or focus on to enhance your/your team's tech sophistication? *(Select at least one: See What's Out There and Experiment, Get Additional Training on AI, Develop Your Social Media Policies, Expand Your Thinking about Social Media)*	
5. Is there anything else that would be helpful to consider?	

Creating Your Action Plan

Now that you've assessed tech sophistication and identified the activities you'd like to try, use the space below to outline your action plan for implementing each one. As you do, consider who will be involved, what resources or support are needed, how the activity fits into existing workflows, the specific actions you'll take, and how you'll know whether it's making a difference. Consider focusing on 2 to 3 activities and/or what your budget and capacity will allow for to get started.

ACTIVITY/TACTIC	MY ACTION PLAN

Appendix: Detailed Methodology

I. PROJECT AIMS

The underlying research study leverages qualitative, in-depth interviews with communications staff at public health agencies across the United States. The aim was to identify structural features of departments that communicators feel contribute to effective operations and communications — as well as strategies for enhancing those or workarounds as needed.

II. SAMPLING & RECRUITING

The study utilized a purposeful sampling approach intended to generate a sample that was heterogeneous with respect to key characteristics that might influence the communications department functions and strategies. Thus, researchers developed a sample of public health agencies that varied with respect to their jurisdiction (state as well as large, medium, and small local agencies), their governance structure (centralized, decentralized, or mixed), and state population characteristics (including region, political leaning, rurality and racial/ethnic composition). An effort was made to include more than one agency in a given state, to allow consideration of the relationships between agencies.

Participants were then selected based on their work as communications professionals: all participants were responsible for developing public-facing communications for their agencies. Titles ranged from Director of Communications to Public Information Officer (PIO) to Health Educator. Names and contact information were identified on agency websites or through contact lists from the Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC). When PHCC had contact information, a staff member facilitated an introduction to the de Beaumont Foundation (dBF) researcher. dBF staff were responsible for recruiting.

Communicators varied with respect to their titles and specific roles, but were all engaged in core functions that commonly included: media/press management, social media and production, agency website development and maintenance, advertising/PSA campaign management, and materials development (e.g., brochures). In addition, some agencies had community outreach responsibilities, such as overseeing community health workers or teams that answer a hotline. Finally, a few had in-house language translation capacity.

Researchers interviewed 50 participants. A summary of agency and participant characteristics is shown in Tables 1A and 1B.

III. INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted by experienced, qualitative researchers at HORP and dBF from December 4, 2024, to May 7, 2025. Interviews were conducted in English over Zoom and lasted approximately 60 minutes. They relied on a semi-structured guide comprised of open-ended questions that were centered around the research questions below. Interviews were recorded with permission and transcribed for analysis. There was no financial incentive for participation, but participants were offered the chance to see study results when the study was complete. All participants provided verbal, informed consent.

IV. SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Investigation was guided by the research questions below:

1. What are the structures (staffing, administration, finances) of communications departments, as well as the auxiliary teams, that support dissemination and community connection (e.g., social media or web teams, community outreach, translation) in state and local public health departments across the country? How are these departments and functions connected to each other?

2. A. What are communications staffs' perceptions of factors that enhance and hinder what they feel are effective communications?
B. How do they grow or strengthen factors that are helpful? How do they work around those that are challenging?

V. ANALYSIS

We used a team-based, codebook approach to thematic analysis (TA), supported by Dedoose analytic software. Analysis focused on perspectives about the features/factors that impacted communications, and communicators' views on what could be done to enhance strengths and work around challenges. The codebook included both deductive, research interest-driven codes and inductively derived codes from initial examination of a subset of interviews. The research team at HORP completed all coding. They applied codebooks thoroughly to each interview, meeting regularly to ensure consistency and refine codes as needed. Through subsequent, systematic exploration of the coded data, they inductively identified themes that described these common factors and strategies. Consensus on themes and their meaning in relation to research questions was reached through team discussion.

VI. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

The study was approved by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health.
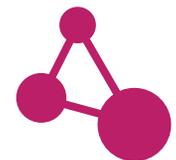
VII. PARTICIPANTS

Table 1A. Description of Agencies and Communications Departments/Teams

CHARACTERISTICS		NUMBER
Jurisdiction/ Scale of Agency[1]	State	14
	Large LHD	14
	Medium LHD	11
	Small LHD	11
Public Health Governance Structure in State[2]	Centralized	4
	Decentralized	38
	Shared/Mixed	8
Geographical Region[3]	Northeast	8
	Midwest	14
	South	15
	West	13

CHARACTERISTICS		NUMBER
Political Leaning of State[4]	Republican	17
	Democrat	26
	Swing	7
Rurality of State[5]	<15%	24
	15-<30%	11
	30%+	15
Racial Make-up of State[6]	<25% Non-White	9
	25-<40% Non-White	26
	40%+ Non-White	15

1   Apart from state agencies, health department size was defined using standards provided by the de Beaumont Foundation's PH WINNS Study. Departments were classified as: large local health departments (staff size > 25 and serving a population > 250,000), medium local health departments (staff size > 25 and serving a population of 25,000 to 250,000), and small local health departments (staff size < 25 or serving a population < 25,000).

2   State public health governance structure is taken from the ASTHO Profiles project. See: https://astho.shinyapps.io/profile/

3   Region determined the U.S. Census. See: https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf

4   Political leaning of state defined by considerations of popular vote in past presidential elections available at the time of sampling. See: https://www.270towin.com/states/

5   Rurality defined as percent of population living in rural areas. See: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/geography/guidance/geo-areas/urban-rural.html, 2020 numbers

6   Racial makeup of the state defined according to Census data available at the time of sampling. See: https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/california-population-change-between-census-decade.html; 2020 estimates.

Table 1B. Description of Participant Sample

CHARACTERISTICS		NUMBER
Positioning of Communication Team/Participant[7]	Agency is only public health, so comms team serves all	25
	Agency is broader, but comms team serves only public health	21
	Agency is broader, and comms team serves the whole agency	4
Participant Position on Comms Team[8]	Director of comms team	18
	Manager in comms team	9
	Solo comms staff	23
Number of Years Participant in Position	<1	9
	2-5	28
	6-10	9
	>10	4
Gender of Participant	Female	40
	Male	9
	Other	1
Race/ethnicity of Participant	Black/African American	2
	White	40
	Hispanic/Latino	3
	Other	5

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7   The positioning of communications in the agency was variable. Some agencies were exclusively focused on public health while others had broader jurisdiction, including, for example, Medicaid or WIC programs, or broader county, city or state functions like housing or animal welfare. In agencies focused on public health, the comms staff were naturally focused on public health. In agencies with broader jurisdiction, the participant sometimes focused exclusively on public health and sometimes also served public health and other divisions.

8   Apart from solo comms staff, participant position was defined as either Director (meaning they had direct reports) or as Manager (meaning they reported to a more senior comms staff person).