



FORMAL COMMUNICATIONS SURVEY, QUALITATIVE RESULTS REPORT

2016

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Introduction

In January 2016, all VCCCD employees were invited to complete the online Formal Communications Survey. During the two week administration period, 417 employees submitted responses to the survey. The survey consists of seven questions, six questions with fixed-choice answers and one question with an open-ended response. This report contains the analysis of the open-ended responses to Question 5.

The goal of this analysis was to capture and code responses in a manner that includes both what is currently occurring and what employees see as Improvements. This sense-making approach to coding employs analysis of both the nature and content of responses to surface solutions and articulate a desired VCCCD Formal Communications System. These solutions and a vision of the desired VCCCD Formal Communications System are presented in this report.

Summary of Results

There were 192 responses to Question 5, *What types of improvements could be made to improve formal District-wide communication? (Reminder: Formal communication channels include addressing issues through the chain of command, providing input through committees and/or group forums, and receiving updates through governance committee members, committee minutes, and other written or electronic formats.)*.

The analysis of these responses employed semi-open coding and coded responses into multiple categories if appropriate. In the first stage of coding, categories present in Questions 1-4 were used to organize responses such as Timely, Forms, and Portal. These survey-based categories fell into broader concepts of **How, What, Why, and Via** (channels). Stage Two coding used these How, What, Why, and Via concepts as categories to organize Stage One analysis and refine coding categories. Stage Three coding calibrated and refined coding from Stage Two and tested that codes and categories successfully integrated comments from employees about what is currently occurring and what improvements are desired.

Coding Results by Category

How incorporates comments that relay how employees want communications to be when presented to them (Reliable, Proactive, Collegial) and how they want communications provided to them (in a Synopsis, with Opportunities to Integrate Communications). There were 268 comments coded into **How** with Direct, Timely, and Open, flexible access as the three most used codes in the category. Direct, Open, flexible access, and Regular were the three most used codes that emerged in Stage Two.

What incorporates comments that relay what employees desired to have communications on such as Events, Training, and Issues. There were 150 comments coded into **What** with Policy, Procedure, Practice, Change, and Forms as the three most used codes in the category. Change, Forms, and Training were the three most used codes that emerged in Stage Two.

Why incorporates comments on why VCCCD would want an improved Formal Communications System and is not reported in this section. Outcomes from **Why** results are integrated into this report in the following sections.

Via incorporates comments on employee channels of communications such as HR Tools, Business Tools, website, and calendar. There were 330 comments coded into Via with Email, Committees, and Portal as the three most used codes in the category. Email, Central Reference Feature, and Point Person were the three most used codes that emerged in Stage Two.

A summary table of results is available in Appendix A.

Overview of Desired Formal Communications System

The Formal Communications System is comprised of System Structure and System Content. The System Structure includes the channels of communications, the tools made available to relay information, the policy, procedure, and practice associated with the System, ongoing training on System use, and upkeep of the above. Employees desire System Structure that is organized, flexible, prompt, transparent, user-friendly, free from retaliation, open, and provides multiple opportunities to integrate communications.

The System Content, which includes specific pieces of information and the tone of communications, is influenced greatly by user access to all segments of the System Structure. Employees desire System Content that consistently and proactively alerts them to change as well as System Content concerning vision/direction, issues, problems, events, activities, and specific information pertinent to subsets of users. Implementation and maintenance of the Formal Communications System are the responsibility of the organization and are crucial to the success of the System.

This System accommodates varying employee needs based on time, location, interests, and employee role and provides open, flexible access to both consumers and contributors of information. The desired System incorporates multiple “layers” of information to meet a range of communication depths. These layers of information contain various, defined levels of detail to address the wide range of VCCCD employee need. The policies, procedures, and practice of the System Structure serve to shape System Content that is proactive, complete, and collegial and provides multiple opportunities to integrate communications. The goals of the Formal Communications System are to increase effectiveness of communications, increase efficiency of the organization, and benefit all employees.

System Structure

Electronic Media Component

At the heart of the System Structure is a robust and adaptable electronic media component used as a communications channel. As VCCCD already uses email, websites, and a protected portal, it is not surprising that many employees named these channels in their open-ended

responses. In terms of finding solutions, it is wise to look at the larger categories in which these current communications channels exist. The electronic media component of the Formal Communications System should incorporate the elements already available to employees: electronic, both pushed and on-demand, suitable for long-cycle and short-cycle information, incorporates mobile communications, useable for internal and external communications, and archives information for reference. Flexibility and responsiveness of the Formal Communications System is heavily dependent on this electronic media component.

Human Channel of Communications

The Human Channel of communications is another component of the VCCCD Formal Communications System. This may be through employees in their official role (such as President, Benefits Analyst, Full-time faculty) or in a Committee role (as representative, usually), or as a designated Point Person. VCCCD employees mentioned other employees as a channel of communications and many note the importance of Committee Members. The need for Committee Members to have strong multi-directional communications surfaced in the open-ended responses. Also, the function of Committee Members can be strengthened to provide more complete communication to those they represent. Other employees, such as in the following comments, recognized that committee compliance with external standards is not sufficient for their communications needs. These comments highlight the need for communications in addition to those required by external entities for compliance:

“There is a limited information trail to satisfy statutory requirements.”

“The only way I know what is happening in committees is by reading their minutes. And lots of committees do not have the current minutes posted on the website. So, if reading posted minutes is the only way I get information on committee decisions then the minutes need to include more specific information and be posted to the website within a week of the meeting (even in draft form).”

Layers of Information with a Range of Detail Levels

To increase effective communications, structure them with a range of detail levels and relay “layers” of information ranging from general to more specific. This approach encourages clear communication in a transparent system with flexible entry/exit points. It also allows users to clarify or add to their personal store of information in the way most suitable to them. This system better supports transmission of consistent and accurate information because it is linked and structured to present different levels of detail on all VCCCD Formal Communications. At present, the information provided lacks sufficient System Structure to be wholly effective. The following employee comments describe the challenges to effective communications in the current system:

“The formal methods of communication look great for purposes of accreditation, but they fall short for purposes of efficiently conveying information to faculty and staff. There are too many

channels and too many places to get updates. How to resolve this problem will be difficult, but it is the problem as I see it."

This employee observed the challenges to effective communications within some of the components of the current system:

"I believe the information is being provided but there are several reasons which may be the cause of why individuals have concerns:

- 1. Employees are not given time to attend the forums or meetings to hear the information as they are too busy and/or their supervisors will not allow them.*
- 2. The same group of faculty/employees attend the meetings.*
- 3. Even though the forums/groups meetings are staggered there is never a good time to hit a vast majority of employees.*
- 4. The email system is overused and therefore not paid attention to.*
- 5. The portal is not utilized as it should be."*

And another employee captures challenges with communications that depend on a hierarchy in this comment:

"Information sent through the "chain of command" in both directions is too dependent upon the common interests of all parties. Information sent back to department, via dean, chair, senate, is limited to what the speaker deems important or has time to convey. Requests from classified staff are dependent upon managers pushing them forward, if there is not time or interest, valid suggestions get shelved or dismissed."

Detail Levels

For more general or first level information, incorporate links to more in-depth information in a synopsis or other brief format. This might be used for calendar postings, newsletters, or other pushed formats. This level is useful in relaying large amounts of information in a timely and regular manner without overloading those who need less detailed information. One employee remarked on the desire for this level of information in this way:

"it would still be helpful to have this information blasted via email, or some type of alert system that sends out snippets or headlines so we at least have some idea of what's going on that may impact our service areas."

For more specific or second level information (such as Committee Meeting notes or documenting changes in a policy, procedure, or practice), short descriptive or explanatory text accompanies links to more in-depth information. This type of information is essential for many employees to do their job efficiently and effectively. An employee expressed her need for this level of information in this way:

"When District or college policy/procedure changes, send out an email to those who need to know. This info does not always trickle down from managers. Better to be informed of a change

rather than be told after you've done something that it's wrong. I should not have to check in Tools every time to see if a form I've been using or a policy I've been following is still current."

The third level of information includes source documents (such as formal policy, procedure, and practice documents). Linking the third level of information to the first and second level communications allows any user to access source documents to verify, clarify, or expand their understanding of System Content. Linking the layers of information creates transparency, clarity, and consistency of Formal Communications. Without this level of information, miscommunications occur and the effectiveness of communications can be dramatically decreased, as noted here:

"I have found that, when official information travels "through the chain of command" as repeated from EVP through Deans down to Chairs, etc., it sometimes gets modified, based on the interpretation of it as normally occurs through the layers of command. And sometimes decisions/info change, and the newest version does not get disseminated properly the second time around. It might be more effective to have official info (from whatever level of command it originates from) disseminated from the top directly to all levels concerned in written form to prevent those modifications I was referring to and any misunderstanding."

Direct, Targeted Communications

Employees expressed the desire for direct, targeted communications (sometimes in terms of All Users emails) to facilitate dissemination of information to specific employees. One employee commented:

"There could be a specific group for part-time employees, where we receive info."

Lists for targeted communications would need to be created and maintained, just as policy, procedure, and practice for the Lists would need to be developed and enforced. Having lists for targeted communications facilitates movement of information to the employees who need or want it. These lists could be determined by job role (part-time faculty, Instructional Data Specialists) or content relayed (Basic Skills activities, etc.)

Central Reference Feature

Consider a Central Reference feature to centralize and archive these communications and build policy, procedure and practice around the use of this Central Reference feature. A powerful Search Function is important to users' ability to use this feature completely, just as it is with the portal, website, and email. Again, and as with all elements of the Formal Communications System, this feature should be user-friendly and include ongoing initial and refresher trainings. This need is stated by one employee in the following comment:

"Provide one centralized location for the communication so that employees do not have to waste time trying to find the variety of locations where the communication is deposited."

Multiple Opportunities to Integrate Communications

Employees submitted comments about the challenges to integrating communications and expressed a desire for multiple opportunities to do so. One comment communicates the need for the organization to provide additional resources to facilitate integrating communications:

“Finally, more time to receive, absorb and digest these communications would be helpful, as would more full-time staff to deal with the activities.”

The preceding comment captures the complexity of integrating communications. The employee notes that it is more than just receiving the communications and that integration includes understanding of Content and how that Content affects the employee. This employee notes that the time for integrating communications may not exist because of lack of staff. Another employee conveyed their current situation and its impact on their ability to communicate by writing:

“I could go on, but this is the first week of school and I am too busy.”

By relaying communications in layers and with a range of detail levels, the System Structure provides one avenue for employees to integrate communications in multiple ways. Use of both electronic and human channels of communications can also provide employees with multiple, recurring ways to integrate communications.

Policy, Procedure, Practice

The policy, procedure, and practice instituted with the desired Formal Communications System provide consistency and serve employees by delineating expectations and providing a roadmap for action. Considerable effort from the organization may be needed to ensure that appropriate policy, procedure, and practice are created, instituted, and enforced. The great need for this segment of System Structure is noted in the following comment:

“Plus, the information given by different staff and the differing variations in what is allowed by district for different colleges is disturbing. There should be clear, written policies and not arbitrary processes set by individuals. Those policies should then be enforced in the same way with each college.”

The manner in which policy, procedure, and practice are created, instituted, and enforced can be an effective means to disseminate and implement the District’s vision, values, and mission.

System Content

Employees submitted comments on desired System Content that encompassed the subject or area of Content and the tone or approach of the Content.

The two most desired areas of Content were Policy, Procedure, Practice and Change. These areas overlapped in some comments as in the following:

“Regarding any new or updated policies and procedures within the District, it would be helpful to be notified through email of these updates. Email notifications that there are new procedures in place and where to find the instructions in the portal would be helpful.”

A collegial tone and approach to communications is desired. Some employees mentioned the tone of communications and how tone can contribute to the overall feeling or atmosphere of an organization:

“Recognize the VCCCD is not the military, and treat communications in a manner that is not top-down and commanding. Communication that is informative and collegial would be more effective in producing a cooperative team-oriented environment.”

The choice of terms can also affect the tone of communications, as in the following comment:

“I think terms like "chain of command" are outdated and refers to a negative way of thinking termed "Silo management". Silos create an environment where sharing and collaborating is virtually impossible. Those in charge of specialized knowledge often embrace the belief that "knowledge is power" and erect silos to protect their turf. They act primarily in the interest of their own silo — not the company. Food for thought.”

Goals for the Formal Communications System

The goals of the Formal Communications System are to increase effectiveness of communications, increase efficiency of the organization, and benefit all employees. These goals are key in demonstrating to employees the desired outcome of the Formal Communications System.

How employees experience the Formal Communications System influences their view of the organization itself. Many employees view their organization as purposeful and deliberate in the creation of conditions or systems and the Formal Communications System is no exception. Without clear, stated goals and a formal communications system that works to meet employee needs, employees may feel that the current system was designed to meet some other purpose. Employees may assign negative motivations to the organization in order to explain an insufficient system that does not meet their needs. When the current system fails to adequately address employees’ needs, they may ascribe their experience to a purposeful attempt to exclude participation, as in these comments:

“No one has ever trained me or walked me through all that the portal has to offer. It has been a trial and error, learn as I go process. It would be nice if this could happen but I understand that there is a hierarchy, and every class of employee is treated differently.”

“I think it's okay. Keep in mind that I am an adjunct instructor and am not paid to become involved with the District all that much. ...The reliance the District places upon adjunct instructors is not balanced with involving us in VCCCD activities and communications, and generally, I prefer it that way. I do my work, I receive many communications through email, and even though adjunct instructors are rather marginalized, it's okay with me. Maybe if I were paid to be involved, even as you were paid to put this survey together, I might be more interested.”

How a Formal Communications Systems is designed, implemented, and maintained impacts the organization's effectiveness and overall environment, as well as employee's view of the organization and their role in it.

Increase Effectiveness of Communications

Implementing a Formal Communications System that supports direct, regular, and complete communications and offers multiple opportunities to integrate information will impact the effectiveness of communications. The following comment describes barriers to effective communication in the current system:

"The formal subsystem is slow and cannot compete with the informal subsystem-which is unreliable, but info. gets there first and that leaves accurate info to compete with what's already in place."

And another employee relayed the impact of receiving information through the current system in this comment:

"Dissemination of information is not handled well. Most of the time, it's "through the grapevine" [sic] that we hear about news and information. Receiving info in this way leaves employees with a feeling of disrespect for those at the top of the "Chain of Command".

Increase Efficiency of the Organization

The efficiency of the organization is impacted by the current Formal Communications System in multiple ways, such as inefficient use of resources that impact students and employees as expressed in the following comments:

"Communication is lacking and that creates many problems."

Employee actions based on incorrect information can result in inefficient use of resources and negatively impact employees' ability to perform their duties as illustrated by the following employee comments:

"There have been so many times I have done something and found out the procedure has changed only when I get an email from District that I am wrong."

"Often times we are not notified of changes and send students to the wrong places for information. "

"When there are employee or position changes it is not communicated around so we end up trying to chase down someone who is no longer in that position. "

"Much of the information is hearsay that requires follow-up inquiries."

Note that a situation where the System Structure does not allow individual employee participation as a contributor or consumer of communications also impacts other employees who are called upon to be an intermediary to System Structure and reduces efficiency of the organization, as in this comment:

“Forms are too hard to find and thus the reason for not access[ing] HR Toolbox and just call[ing] the Dept Office”

Employees are able to focus more time on carrying out job duties when the Formal Communications System provides reliable information through open, flexible access, and sufficient ongoing training, as stated here:

“I don't how to improve this but, it is difficult to locate the information/forms etc. on the site. When I look for a form or related information I find myself spending more time searching for the form than it take to complete the form.”

“Need training session and clearer indications of where things can be found on the portal. I struggle with finding things I need, although I have seen some improvements over the last few years.”

Benefit All Employees

The effectiveness of communications and the efficiency of the organization impact employees' immediate work environment and their experience in the organization. Supplying information to employees can help them contextualize their own work and in the organization:

“At [College Name] Pres. [Employee Name] has held regular, open meetings. As part-time faculty, I find them very interesting and helps me understand the complexity of managing/running the school.”

The current system contributes to employee stress and their perception of the organization as unsupportive, as noted here:

“More timely communication of sensitive items is necessary to limit employee stress levels and alleviate concerns.”

“While everyone at the district works diligently to meet employee needs, more timely correspondence would afford recipients more reasonable deadlines, instead of having to run around madly in an attempt to meet a short (e.g. 2-hour) deadline.”

“This would avoid finding out about new policies or information at a late date and feeling out of the loop.”

“We also do not know in a timely fashion of events for Staff and Faculty on our own campus or at the other campuses that could be beneficial or of interest.”

Conclusion

The analysis of the comments submitted in the VCCCD Formal Communications Survey served to surface a desired Formal Communications System incorporating employee suggested improvements. The goals of this Formal Communications System are to increase effectiveness of communications, increase efficiency of the organization, and benefit all employees.

This System is composed of System Structure and System Content. System Structure includes an electronic media component; human channel of communications; layers of information with a range of detail levels; direct, targeted communications; a central reference feature; multiple opportunities to integrate communications; and policy, procedure, practice. The System Content includes the subject or area of Content and the tone or approach of the Content. Creation, implementation, and maintenance of the Formal Communications System are the responsibility of the organization and are crucial to the success of the System.

Appendix A

Number of Coded Comments in Descending Order by Category and Code

VIA, 330		HOW, 268		WHAT, 150	
Email	67	Direct	32	Policy, procedure, practice	44
Committees	45	Timely	31	Change	13
Portal	31	Open - Flexible Access	27	Forms	13
Website	17	Regular	24	Training, refresher	13
HR Tools, Business Tools	16	Proactive	20	Issues, problems	7
President, Manager	15	User-Friendly	19	Activities	5
Central Reference Feature	14	Synopsis	16	More	5
Point Person	8	Applicable, Pertinent	14	Events	3
Senate	8	Links	12	Management, Administration status	3
Onboarding, Orientation	7	Current	10	Student Support	3
Newsletter	6	Consistent	9	Vision, direction	3
On-site	6	Effective	8	Accreditation	2
Colleague	5	Opportunities to Integrate Com's	8		
HR Actions	5	Clear, Transparent	7		
Calendar	4	Complete	7		
Chancellor	4	Organized	7		
List for targeted communications	4	Open - Honest	5		
Meetings other than committees	4	Accurate	4		
Electronically	3	Collegial	4		
Search Function	2	Reliable	4		
Telephone	2	Free From Retaliation	3		
Video	1				