

Clear Language and Organizational Change



**HALTON REGION
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

Your source for community health



Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change



Halton Region Health Department

Mission Statement

Together with the Halton community, the Health Department works to achieve the best possible health for all.

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

Halton Region Health Department Equal Access Strategy

- Achieving the goals of public health, which are to promote and protect health and prevent disease, is in part dependent on the ability of individuals to make informed decisions about their health. In order for people to make informed decisions, health information needs to be accessible to all - in our department, this principle is known as 'equal access'.
- By applying clear language principles and using other research findings, the Health Department is getting closer to achieving equal access for all Halton residents.



Clear Language and Organizational Change

- ✦ The Health Promotion and Communications Program
- ✦ Setting standards
- ✦ Challenges and successes
- ✦ Future directions

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change



Health Promotion and Communications Program

- Provides services to all Health Department programs
- Staff are strongly encouraged to work with HPC to create resources
- The HPC program evolved significantly over the past few years

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

- The Health Promotion and Communications program (HPC): a Health Department program which works closely with staff to develop health promotion and health communications strategies for their content areas. HPC offers this service to ensure the strategies used meet the needs of the various target audiences.

- The HPC program reviews all types of resources produced by programs and works with staff to help them understand and use clear language principles. HPC is a free, internal service.

- As the HPC program focused more on applying clear language principles and less on grade level assessments alone, the program has been met with greater acceptance.

- The number of staff in the HPC program has grown over the last three years. The number of reviews provided by HPC has grown exponentially.

Setting Standards

- What is your organization's writing culture (barriers)
- Making a case for clear language
 - for the Health Department (management)
 - for staff / colleagues

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

- Before setting standards it is important to have a good understanding of what staff know about or think about clear language.

- Anyone in our Department is able to produce resources. Our staff are content experts, but they are not all good writers.

- In our Department, at first, the focus was on keeping the grade level down, which led to people accusing HPC of 'dumbing down' resources and being the 'big word police'. Very few staff knew about clear language principles and even fewer were using them.

- In Ontario, there is no requirement to use clear language.

- Clear language was promoted to our management as one of the strategies which could help to ensure that our programs are accessible to everyone (highly supported).

- At first, staff buy-in was limited and achieved one person at a time.

- It is important to develop a strong rationale for using clear language based on the needs of your audiences.

Developing a Strategy...

- To get staff talking about clear language
- To provide staff with an opportunity to ask challenging questions about the value of clear language
- To partner with staff to determine what they would need to improve their skills

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

The Solution...

- Attend team meetings to discuss
 - literacy in Canada, Ontario, and Halton
 - principles of clear language
 - clear language applications for their programs
 - a new clear language tool
- Ask staff how they would like to learn more about using clear language

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

What we did

- Attended team meetings and made a strong case for clear language in the context of public health.

What happened?

- The presentations were very well received - they helped staff to understand the value of clear language.
- Very few people questioned the need to use clear language, but each challenge was welcomed as an opportunity to give a real life example of how clear language could help.

Where did staff want to go from here

- The results from an evaluation which was completed after the presentation indicated that many staff saw the value of clear language, wanted to learn more, and would like to attend clear language workshops.
- Resistance to HPC suggestions started to fade and staff appreciated the feedback more and more.

Clear Language Workshops

- Hosted two CLAD clear language workshops (Fall, 2001)
 - roughly 40 staff attended
 - over 70 people expressed interest
- Today, staff specifically ask for a 'clear language' review of their resources

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

•Staff continue to be strongly encouraged to have their resources reviewed by the Department's Health Promotion and Communications Program (HPC), even if they attended the workshops. The workshops increased staff's acceptance of the reviews provided by the HPC program. Staff's ability to comfortably use clear language principles is dependent upon the amount of writing they do.



Setting the agenda (improving poorly written and designed resources)

- Shifting the focus from grade level assessments to using clear language allowed HPC to suggest even greater changes to drafts.
- By helping staff to understand the consequences of not using clear language, HPC was able to promote clear language more easily.
- The argument for clear language was also strengthened because HPC placed a high level of importance on the needs of the target audience when creating resources.

Individual needs (staff resistance and limited knowledge and skills)

- Different personalities and learning styles require different approaches.

Setting Expectations (a lack of success stories supports a lack of buy-in)

- Clear language requires advocates.
- Obtain management support to promote clear language
- Work directly with managers to review specific departmental resources – after experiencing, first hand the benefits of clear language, managers encouraged staff to have resources reviewed more frequently and earlier in the process by HPC.
- As staff experienced the benefits, they would also come back more readily.

New Directions

- Review 'key words' used for directories
- Examine Web site applications
- Promote clear verbal communications
- Consider developing a formal policy
- Examine developing training sessions

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

Key word research

- The Halton Region Health Department relies on specific key words to enable community members to access public health information and services. These key words are utilized across several databases, directories and publications and are updated based on new programs and services. Over the years the key words have changed to become much more identifiable within the community.

Web site

- Consider using call-out boxes with definitions for more detailed information.
- Investigate the possibility of adding video or audio content.

Verbal communication

- Potentially work with program staff to look at the effectiveness of face to face, verbal communications and explore how clear language principles could help increase an individual's understanding of health information
- Work with staff to develop and implement standards to help script verbal communications with consumers

Top 5 Lessons Learned

- Position the issue
- Learning is on-going (for everyone)
- Change takes time
- Be willing to adapt your approach
- Respect your colleagues

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

•Change takes time: our clear language strategy has evolved over the last four year and will continue to do so for many more years. With every new type of program there are 'early adopters' and those who fear change - be committed to changing everyone, but be patient.

Clear Language and Organizational Change

For more information please contact,
Jamie Lamothe
Health Communications Officer
Halton Region Health Department
905-825-6060 ext. 7851
TTY 905-827-9833



**HALTON REGION
HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

Your source for community health



Health Promotion
and Communications

Halton Region Health Department ©, September 28, 2002. Clear Language and Organizational Change

No photo
available
at this
time.

Clear Language and Organizational Change

Jamie Lamothe

<http://www.region.halton.on.ca/health/>

Jamie Lamothe, a Health Communications Officer with the Halton Region Health Department in Oakville, Ontario, helps staff to develop and implement communications and health-promotion projects. Clear language makes these projects more effective. He has helped set high standards for the department by advocating clear language, offering training, and providing support.