

RULE OF THUMB FOR COMMUNICATION IN MSD PROGRAMMES

Somebody smarter than us once said, “good communication is like a fart – silent or loud – if it doesn’t get noticed, you’ve failed.” Effective communication is an underappreciated and underdeveloped skill set for the MSD professional, often relegated to a communications team to develop formal, public-facing (i.e. funder-facing) outputs. But MSD professionals simply can’t do their jobs without putting the right words in the right order. From speaking with businesses about potential opportunities, to households about their sanitation habits, to troubleshooting tricky partnerships, to describing to a funder just erm, uhh, what exactly is the ‘systemic change’ you’ve been ‘facilitating’ for the last three years.

Comms matters. It can’t be siloed to one part of the team. But the comms struggle is real. So, let’s ask our AI friend, OMG, how we can avoid simply blowing a lot of hot air with our MSD communications.



OMG, what are some rules of thumb for effective communications for an MSD professional?



Know What They Care About

- **Funders:** Impact interests them – whether in numbers or stories. Ideally both. But don’t forget that funders are also interested in their host country government’s agenda – help them connect this work to that agenda.
- **Businesses:** Talk profit, reduced risk, market share, reliable supply chains, not inclusive facilitation, systemic change, or sector transformation.
- **Local communities:** Make it about their lives: better access, fair prices, fewer losses, dependable incomes.
- **Rule: Tailor your pitch or prepare to watch eyes glaze over.**



Hmm, TBH, I’m not sure I’m getting my money’s worth for my paid subscription, OMG. Targeting your communications to your audience is Comms 101, isn’t it? With many of these communication skills, the problem isn’t that the humble MSD professional doesn’t know what good comms versus bad comms is, it’s that they forget to translate their internal MSD-ese into what matters for their audience.

Linked to knowing what they care about, is knowing what you care about. What’s the point of your comms? Is it to build a relationship, inform somebody of an opportunity or try to influence them to do something different? Why you’re communicating is equally as important as tailoring your message to whom you’re communicating with.



Talk Like a Human Being

- Skip the jargon. If your message sounds like it was written by a committee, no one will remember it. Be conversational and clear.
- Rule: **If your audience has to Google half the words you say, you've lost them.**



Hard yes, WTF. Although this hurts coming from a non-human. One of the lessons of effective communication in MSD programmes is to avoid using many of the words we MSD nerds associate with your average MSD programme. Functions and facilitation are all fine and good, but experience suggests the more we use everyday language, the better people will understand WTF we're trying to do.

But OMG, shouldn't we recognise that impenetrable comms lies deep within the DNA of the development industry as a whole? It's not just an MSD problem, right? Aren't we swimming against a tide of bloviation?



Indeed. Development organisations are notorious for jargon-laden, impenetrable prose.

Here's a gem from the world of development-speak:

"The programme seeks to operationalise an ecosystemic, demand-driven approach to sustainable livelihoods by facilitating multi-sectoral stakeholder engagements, fostering enabling environments, and embedding locally contextualised capacity-building interventions to drive systemic impact at scale."

Translation: We're trying to help people make a living by working with different groups and teaching useful skills.

And great choice of word, my human friend. Bloviation refers to verbose, inflated speech or writing that is long-winded and pompous but ultimately says little of substance. It's often used to describe political or bureaucratic language that sounds impressive but lacks clarity or meaningful content. Perfectly suited to much of development-sector jargon!

Keep It Short

- People have no patience for a 20-minute explanation of how your program works. Give them the highlights, then answer questions if they're curious.
- Rule: **Brevity wins. If you can't explain it in a sentence, you don't understand it.**



A tip close to our heart, OMG. Rarely does somebody ask for a longer explanation of things. In fact, being able to explain something succinctly and clearly is a rule of thumb for how well you understand something. The depth of your expertise is not measured by the length of your sentences. It's not the size of your knowledge, but what you do with it. It takes effort to communicate effectively. A quote, variously attributed to Cicero, Pascal and Twain springs to mind: "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead."



But as any MSD professional understands, knowing how to communicate effectively is only a part of the puzzle. You've got to have a reason (ahem, an incentive) to be clear and concise. The hard truth is that sometimes people use confusing, lengthy communications on purpose. It could be that they don't have anything of substance to say so are hiding under the comfort blanket of wholesome development words. Who can argue with gender-transformative, climate-resilient inclusive anything? Or it could be because they're being paid by the word to develop a bid that ticks all of the development jargon boxes.

The point is, MSD practitioners need to recognise that communication isn't just a soft skill — it's *the* skill that can make or break their work. MSD is not just about thinking and acting differently, OMG, it's also about communicating differently. Whether you're persuading a business, explaining systemic change to a funder or keeping your team from confusing itself with word salads, your comms must be practical, relatable and understood by your audience. Good communication needs to connect. Talk like a human, keep it short and simple, bring it to life.