



# SLDS Issue Brief

## Effective Communications for SLDS Teams

Communications are critical for the success of any project. For statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) project teams, effective communications help ensure that team members are able to coordinate efforts across different departments or different organizations to build a data system that serves the needs of all stakeholders. They also contribute to transparency around the data system's goals, development, implementation, and use, which is essential to maintaining the support and involvement of SLDS partners.

Communications serve a number of functions, from conveying important information to stakeholders to generating enthusiasm and establishing a common direction for the project team. Throughout the process of planning, developing, and sustaining an SLDS, the project team will need effective communications for the following purposes:

- *Informing*: one-way sharing of information about the project that is relevant and tailored to a targeted audience. Informing communications may take the form of email announcements, newsletters, press releases, or other statements about the project.
- *Inquiring*: two-way sharing of information to gain knowledge or feedback. Inquiring communications often include the use of listening or feedback tools such as surveys, focus groups, or stakeholder meetings.
- *Involving*: two-way engagement for decisionmaking and carrying out project activities. Involving communications provide appropriate stakeholders an opportunity to share information and make decisions about policies, programs, procedures, and/or processes.
- *Inspiring*: two-way engagement to persuade people to adopt a specific behavior or move in a certain direction to achieve project goals. Inspiring communications help develop a sense of ownership of the project and encourage stakeholders to become champions for the SLDS.

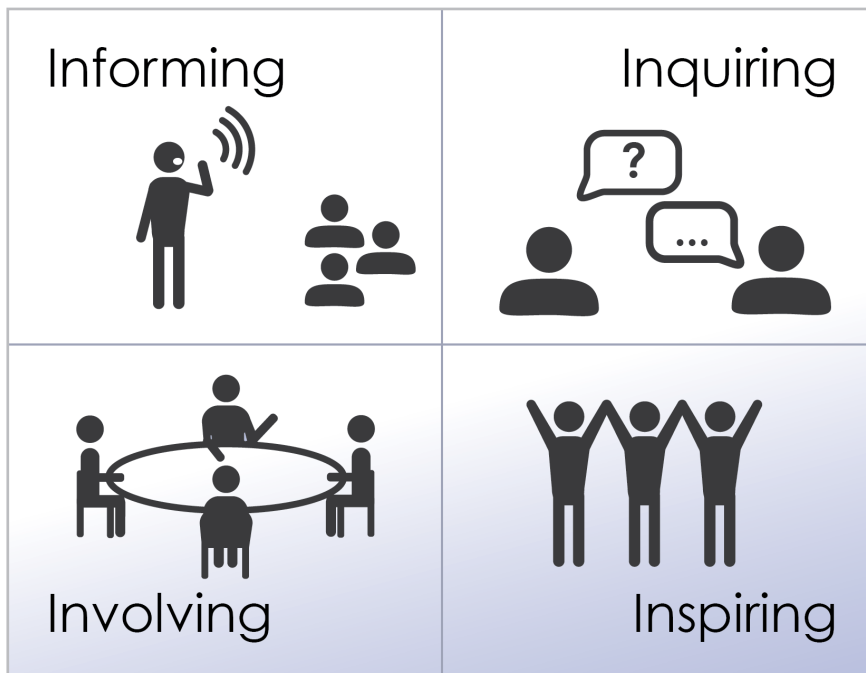


Figure 1. The four functions of effective communications

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For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds>.

Whether communications are delivered verbally, in writing, or through another medium, their effectiveness is determined by the structure and content of the message, the mode of their delivery, and the emotional context underlying how the message is sent and how it is understood.

Following are five common challenges to effective communications and tips for improving the likelihood that messages will be received and understood clearly.

### Challenge 1. Speaking Different Languages

SLDS project teams bring together people with many different interests, roles, and areas of expertise. Most project teams include a combination of information technology (IT) professionals who are responsible for building and maintaining the data system and education program administrators who may be more closely involved in collecting data and using those data for reports and policy questions. For data systems that span multiple sectors of the prekindergarten-to-workforce (P-20W+) spectrum, SLDS project teams might include an even more diverse set of members from different agencies.

For team members from diverse backgrounds to work together effectively, it is important to develop a common language so that everyone understands the vocabulary and activities involved in SLDS work. Technical terms and abbreviations used daily by team members from one department may have little or no meaning for members from another, or the same words may mean different things to people working in different areas. When communicating across departments or areas of expertise, it may be

#### Items to Include in a Project Glossary

- A data dictionary listing all SLDS data elements and their definitions
- Job titles for project staff and brief descriptions of their responsibilities
- IT-specific terms (e.g., Database, Query, Report, Application, and common abbreviations)
- Program-specific terms (e.g., Attendance, Truancy, Reporting Requirements, sector-specific terms, and common abbreviations)
- Processes and procedural terms (e.g., data governance, maintenance)

necessary to “translate” messages from the language of one department to another, making an effort to use terminology that is easily understood by the other group and explaining any specialized ideas or processes in general terms. A glossary of IT and program-related terms used by different groups involved in the project team can provide a useful reference for unfamiliar words and processes as well as standardize definitions for terms that can have more than one meaning.

Additionally, it is important to document and explain the procedures involved in all work related to the SLDS to ensure that it can be understood and replicated if necessary. In general, project team leaders need to make sure that all stakeholders are on the same page regarding project priorities and expectations, and that decisions about the project are made in a transparent manner.

#### Translating Messages within the SLDS Team

When communicating across groups with different roles and expertise, think carefully about what information or action is needed and how the audience is likely to interpret the message.

**Example: An IT Director asks a Program Administrator, “What are your requirements for the application?”**

Questions to consider:

- What specific information does the IT Director need to accomplish the task at hand, and at what level of detail? How can the IT Director communicate this to the Program Administrator?
- How can team members with and without an IT background work together to understand each others' questions and provide the necessary answers?

**Example: A Program Administrator tells an IT Staff Member, “I need a report on attendance.”**

Questions to consider:

- How is attendance defined? What additional information does the report need to include? What data elements are needed to give this information?
- Will the report need to be recreated or updated in the future? That is, does the process for creating the report need to be documented and the code stored so it can be reproduced later?

## Challenge 2. Preferred Modes of Communication

Certain methods of communication may be more effective than others with specific audiences. Some people comprehend instructions or complex processes more easily in writing; for others, charts or tables might be easier to understand. Busy managers might prefer to receive project updates in a weekly meeting rather than in a lengthy email. Other team members might feel more comfortable making requests and documenting decisions via email rather than in person or over the phone.

As a result of individual preferences and interpersonal dynamics, some messages might not be completely understood when delivered through one particular method. It is important to learn which methods are most effective for different team members and leaders and utilize them as much as possible. Repeating messages in multiple formats can also be an effective way to clarify understanding of certain tasks. For example, after a project team meeting, a summary email reiterating the decisions made, next steps, and responsibilities of each team member can remind team members of the topics discussed and help ensure that tasks are understood and executed correctly.

## Challenge 3. Differing Expectations

SLDS partner agencies and stakeholders might have different expectations about what the system will or will not be based on their perceptions, past experiences, or prior communications about the project. These expectations can lead to misunderstandings or conflicts about the purpose of the SLDS, and some partners could withdraw support for a project that is not what they anticipated.

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It is important for project leaders to manage expectations by communicating clearly and early in the project about what the system will and will not do, as well as the work needed for the SLDS to successfully achieve its objectives. Discussions about the system's capabilities need to begin from the perspective of what functionality is possible given resources and practical restraints rather than what is theoretically possible. Instead of overselling the uses and benefits of the SLDS in an effort to gain support and enthusiasm for the project, leaders

need to make sure all partners have a realistic and accurate understanding of the system's use and the timeline for its development. In addition, leaders should include processes and procedures for enhancements or additions to the system so that all stakeholders know when and how such enhancements will be included or not.

## Challenge 4. Unclear Roles and Responsibilities

When project team members or stakeholders do not understand their roles in the SLDS and the importance of their involvement, the system may lose important data sources and support. Additionally, confusion over who owns SLDS data and what can and cannot be done with it can cause problems for access and data use.

Project leaders need to encourage all parties involved in the SLDS to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities in the system.

It is important to thoroughly document all roles, policies, and procedures related to the SLDS and ensure that all partners understand them. This documentation might cover data collection practices, data governance roles and procedures, data access and security measures, and any other activity in which the project team and stakeholders interact with the SLDS. Project leaders need to encourage all parties involved in the SLDS to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities in the system.

## Challenge 5. Lack of Access or Opportunities for Communication

Physical distance between project team members, unresponsive stakeholders, and conflicting priorities at partner organizations can all hamper effective project communications. Scheduling regular status updates with the project team—whether through in-person meetings, conference calls and webinars, emails, or a combination of methods—can help project work stay on track and on the minds of team members. To maintain the support and enthusiasm of partner agencies and stakeholders, project leaders can offer a variety of avenues for involvement based on each stakeholder's interests and availability. Additionally, leaders need to make sure adequate processes exist for both project team members and stakeholders to raise questions, escalate issues, address concerns, and receive feedback, both within and across agencies.

## More Tips for Effective Communications

Developing skills in the following areas can help communicators increase the likelihood that their messages will be understood as well as improve their ability to receive and interpret messages from others.

### Non-Verbal Communications

- When leading a meeting, pay attention to the demeanor of others in the room. Are they responding to what you are saying? Do they seem confused or uninterested? Do you need to adjust your communications approach to reach your audience more effectively?
- When speaking with colleagues one-on-one, gauge their reactions as well as their words. Are they genuinely engaged? Are they visibly perplexed or irritated? Are there underlying issues that need to be addressed before they are fully engaged?
- Make eye contact with your audience to establish a connection with them, but be aware that too much direct eye contact can make listeners uncomfortable.

### Listening

- When listening to a colleague, make sure you are engaged in the moment and understand what they are saying rather than thinking only about how you will respond.
- As you respond to a speaker, paraphrase what he or she is saying. This demonstrates your understanding of their message and provides an opportunity to clear up any misinterpretations or misunderstandings.
- Before meeting with difficult colleagues or addressing controversial issues, try to clear your mind of pre-existing perceptions that might affect how you approach them. Interactions are often colored by past experiences or biases. Be open minded and approach each interaction as a clean slate.

### Managing Stress in the Moment

- In a stressful situation, pause for a moment to collect your thoughts rather than allowing stress to build and become unmanageable.
- If appropriate, inject humor into a tense situation. Humor can help alleviate stress, but it may not be appreciated by certain colleagues or in certain contexts.

### Understanding Emotions

- Practice delivering complex or negative messages in a mirror. Often, the way you perceive yourself is very different from the way others perceive you. A mirror will help you see what others will see.
- As a colleague explains a problem, ask questions to get to the root of the concern. Emotions might get in the way of finding a solution to the problem; try to understand the underlying issues your colleague is facing.

## Additional Resources

Race to the Top – District Convening Communications and Engagement Workbook

<https://rttd.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/4522>

SLDS Best Practices Brief: Stakeholder Communication: Tips from the States

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/best\\_practices.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/best_practices.pdf)

SLDS Issue Brief: Everyone on Board: How to Engage Reluctant Stakeholders and Stakeholders Experiencing Leadership Transitions

[http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/everyone\\_on\\_board\\_Jan2014.pdf](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slids/pdf/everyone_on_board_Jan2014.pdf)

SLDS State Support Team: Data Governance Manual Example – P-20W+ Version

<https://slids.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/3081>

SLDS State Support Team: Data Governance Manual Template – P-20W+ Version

<https://slids.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/3080>

SLDS State Support Team: Data Governance Policy Guide & Template – P-20W+ Version

<https://slids.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/3082>

SLDS State Support Team: Stakeholder Engagement Plan for Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems Guide & Template

<https://slids.grads360.org/#communities/pdc/documents/3083>