



National Collaborating Centre
for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale
des déterminants de la santé

LEARNING TOGETHER:

COMMUNICATING TO PROPEL ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY FOR ACTION ON HEALTH EQUITY



This paper brings together research and practice expertise on communicating about health equity to build capacity for public health action on health equity.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY FOR HEALTH EQUITY ACTION INITIATIVE

The [Organizational Capacity for Health Equity Action Initiative](#) (OCI) fosters learning about frameworks, strategies and organizational conditions that can enable Canadian public health organizations to develop and sustain their capacity for health equity action. The initiative uses a learning circle, reviews and discussion of the literature, and practice site implementation to explore these objectives. The learning

circle is made up of research and practice experts who meet on a regular basis to integrate evidence, expert opinion and practice-based innovation and learning.

The initiative is described fully in *Organizational Capacity for Health Equity Action Initiative: A brief description*.¹

Visit www.nccdh.ca to learn more about the OCI.

INTRODUCTION

As public health organizations build capacity to effectively address the social determinants of health and advance health equity, they go through a process of organizational change.

Learning circle members in the Organizational Capacity for Health Equity Action Initiative (OCI)¹ expressed that effective communication within an organization about health equity is a key ingredient to a successful change process. The National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health designed the OCI to foster learning about how Canadian public health organizations can develop and sustain organizational capacity for health equity action. The initiative used a learning circle, reviews and discussion of the literature, and implementation of specific projects in public health organizations (practice sites) to identify relevant approaches to build organizational capacity. The first cycle of the OCI took place from May 2018 to November 2019.²

Drawn from a review of the literature and expertise of learning circle members,² the approaches in this brief provide guidance on communicating about health equity for health equity champions and leaders at all levels of public health organizations.

In this document, we will:

- describe approaches for internal and external communication about health equity and health equity-oriented organizational processes and activities; and
- identify opportunities to increase capacity for health equity action through improved communication within an organization.

Identifying the evidence

The evidence for this paper is drawn from literature on change communication and health equity- and social justice-oriented communication. Initial searches found limited literature with communication, health equity and organizational capacity as the primary themes. We conducted more focused searches to identify examples that illustrated the various approaches.



COMMUNICATING ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY ACTION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Communication, the “interchange of ideas, opinions and information,” is a foundational competency for public health practitioners.^{3(p5)} When developing organizational capacity for action on health equity, clear and strong communication underscores that health equity is valued by the organization, builds support for change and equips everyone to understand the process and impact of developing organizational health equity capacity.

Effective internal and external communication ensures that the vision, goals, processes and desired outcomes of the health equity activities are consistently transmitted in ways that compel and sustain action within institutions.

This understanding brings forth several distinct communication goals in the context of organizational capacity for health equity. Health equity champions and organizational leaders need to:

- communicate persuasively, and support others to communicate persuasively, about health equity and the structural and social determinants of health;
- make the case for investing in capacity-building for health equity action; and
- describe the range of activities that are being implemented as part of the process of developing organizational capacity for health equity action.

To be effective, communication must:

- move people out of their comfort zones;⁴
- anchor health equity efforts within a larger organizational vision;⁵
- use knowledge and evidence of the nature and extent of the health inequities;⁶ and
- provide explicit areas for action on the social determinants of health to improve health equity.

A well-designed, well-resourced internal and external communication strategy moves organizational health equity goals forward⁷ and contributes to enhanced organizational capacity in this area. By drawing on the expertise of communication professionals, health equity champions and leaders can develop and implement effective communication that builds knowledge, skills and values for action on health equity. Further, it is important to create and nurture a collective feeling that the work is both important as well as applicable to the roles and responsibilities of everyone in the organization (e.g., staff, management, board members).

CHANNELS FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY

Communication influences the internal and external environments within which the organization acts, ways that partnerships develop and processes for sharing information and research, all of which are essential components of organizational capacity for health equity action.⁸ Throughout this resource, you will see references to a wide array of platforms, both formal and informal, where the recommended messaging techniques can be employed. These techniques include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Team and division or departmental meetings
- Coalitions and multisectoral partnerships
- Newsletters, reports and briefing notes to staff, board members and partners
- Strategic planning and visioning exercises
- Official messaging about organizational policies, brand and strategy
- Proposed elevator pitches for team members to describe the organization’s work
- Interpersonal and interprofessional communication, whether in formal meetings or informal conversation
- Stories about organizational successes, failures and goals
- Website and social media content

TIPS FOR DEVELOPING MESSAGES ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY AND SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH

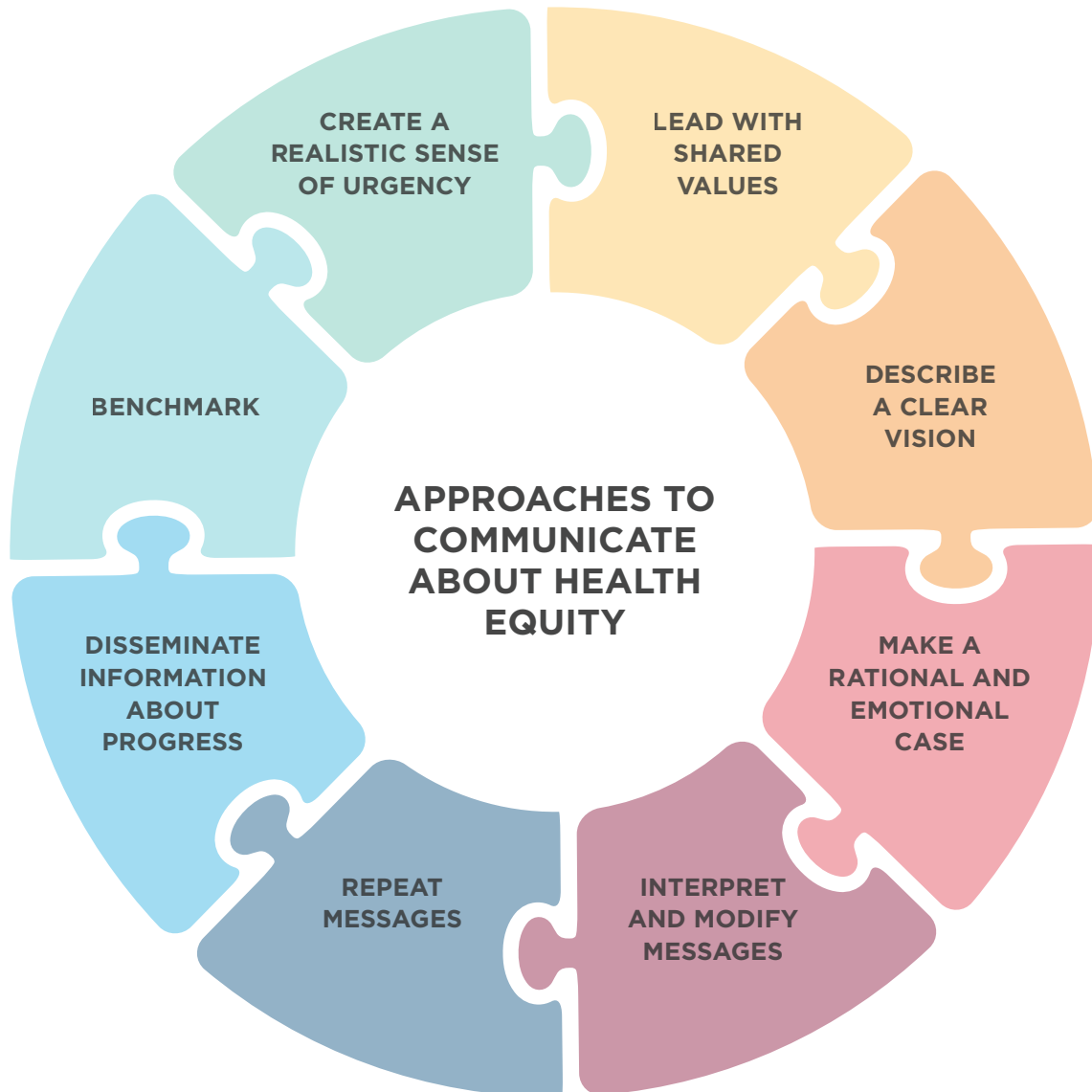
WHAT TO DO	WHAT TO AVOID
Speak about shared values to demonstrate why the audience should care about health equity and the structural and social determinants of health. ⁷	Focusing on values that undermine the issue being discussed (e.g., exceptionalism, deficit thinking).
Use inclusive language (we, our, us) and highlight shared experiences. ⁹	Language that is “othering” (them, they); labeling people as being the issue they are affected by.
Use clear, plain language, with a conversational and familiar tone. ⁹	Technical language, jargon, clinical or academic tone.
Round decimals or fractions into whole numbers, place numbers in context, use social math. ⁹	Complex numbers or large numbers without any context or explanation of meaning.
Challenge conventional understanding with at least one unexpected fact. ⁹	Relying on exhaustive and complicated documentation.
Prime your audience with a fact, image or story they are likely to believe, based on their values, interests and needs. ⁹	Facts, images or stories that audiences may find too contentious or extreme to be believable.
Include innovative arts-based approaches, visual media and audio to communicate. ²	Using limited methods of communication because they are the most comfortable or what is usually done (e.g., only written).
Include a memorable story or fact that can be easily understood, making the issues more tangible. ⁹	Losing the meaning by using abstract concepts that make the message easily forgotten.
Prepare your message content and presentation, focusing on a few key areas. ⁹	Speaking “off the cuff,” not sticking to key messages, too many different messages about multiple issues at once.
Clarify misconceptions, leading with updated facts and truth before myth and misinformation. ¹⁰	Shaming people into changing their minds and putting too much attention on the myth and misinformation.
Test the understanding and interpretation of key messages with people from your desired audience. ¹⁰	Assuming the same messages will resonate and be understood in the same way by everyone.
Focus on solutions that exist and how they can be pursued to encourage a sense of hope and possibility. ¹¹	Dwelling on the problems and disparities, which can reinforce stigma and lead to feelings of hopelessness.
Emphasize a social justice view to highlight collective good and solution-oriented messages. ¹²	Emphasis on a “market justice” view that focuses on individual free will and benefit.
Consider how equity fits into your branding, so that messages about equity are not performative but instead feel honest in relation to how you present yourself as an organization. ¹³	Talking about equity in a way that is inconsistent with how your organization conducts itself externally or internally.

Adapted from Canadian Council on Social Determinants of Health.⁹

APPROACHES FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY

The approaches shown in Figure 1 are useful to communicate the purpose, context, scope, objectives, goals and actions related to the health equity activities of the organization. Organizations will need to emphasize different approaches at different phases of their health equity activities. Creating a sense of urgency is critical early on in a new initiative, while repeating health equity messages consistently is important throughout.

FIGURE 1: APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY ACTION



Create a realistic sense of urgency to jump-start action

Creating a sense of urgency about the need for health equity action in the organization is the first stage and an essential part of the transformation process.⁴ Anchoring health equity efforts as part of a larger communication strategy and vision helps create a sense of urgency.⁵ A sense of urgency communicates that health equity is a pressing concern that the organization must attend to immediately. At the same time, urgency must be balanced with realistic expectations about the time and resources needed to develop equitable, inclusive outcomes. Activities should be conducted in a way that prioritizes time and effort to build meaningful relationships and transformative solutions. Sustainable plans allow for healthy levels of productivity and honour the need for rest throughout the transformative process.

Identifying strategic opportunities to communicate with your team about health equity,¹⁴ including national and global public health issues, can amplify the need for investing in organizational capacity to improve health equity. The cost of inaction must be greater than the status quo, and thoughtful action must seem plausible. Costs of inaction include breach of public trust, risks to the organization's reputation and a misalignment of organizational values and priorities.

Consider what is going on in your community that compels your organization to act, and weave this into your communication messages. This can include evidence and knowledge of existing inequities, or your health equity message can be coupled with another topic that is already seen as important in the public eye.²

Example of application

Under the leadership of a committed director and with the goal to “put the public back in public health,”^{5(p49)} Alameda County Public Health Department developed strong partnerships with low-income communities of colour.⁴ These partnerships propelled the department to address health inequities. An internal unit was established to connect data to action, and health equity was incorporated into the organization's strategic vision.

Lead with shared values

Leading with shared organizational and societal values like solidarity, reciprocity and fairness¹⁵ demonstrates that improving health equity through increased investments in organizational capacity is beneficial for everyone.^{6,7} Values-driven communication articulates what a new system or way of working could look like, why it is important and how to get there together.² Name what values and ethics the organization practices for itself, as well as the organization's desires for the health of the public and communities it serves.

What shared values drive your activities to improve health equity? Ask why health equity matters to staff and communities, how we are affected by health inequities and how equity will benefit well-being.

Example of application

Your organization has identified that families who do not have paid medical leave during the COVID-19 pandemic are more exposed to COVID-19. These families disproportionately represent low-wage workers, women and gender-diverse peoples, and Black and racialized communities. You would like to respond to this by advocating for policies to expand medical leave coverage and you need to provide support for your team to develop and propose policy solutions. You know that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected us all and more of us could benefit from paid medical leave policies. You create a narrative that starts with shared values.¹⁶ You could say “In these unprecedented times, we want to keep our family and friends healthy and safe.”

Describe a clear vision for change

A clear vision for change must be communicated consistently throughout all parts of the organization, including commitment demonstrated and reinforced by organizational leaders.⁴ Change agents should be able to articulate a clear vision in a short period of time.⁵ A clear vision illustrates how the organization “walks the talk” by proposing actions that are aligned with the stated vision. Any action among leaders that is antithetical to the articulated vision can derail the change project.^{4,17} Daily practice can be connected to the health equity organizational vision through informal conversations and conversations between peers. This can support staff and partners to see how they contribute to the vision.

Application

- Participate in a “rocket pitch” and elevator pitch exercise to develop skills in articulating a project, proposal or idea concisely (see Box 1).⁵
- When describing the effect of income inequality on population health, talk about the variety of solutions and the roles that public health practitioners can play, such as advocating for improved labour policies and stronger child and family benefits, as well as connecting people to social supports.¹²

Box 1: Rocket and elevator pitch exercise

An elevator pitch is a concise description of your work and vision. The vision should not take more than five minutes to articulate clearly.⁴

A rocket pitch⁵ is a one-sentence description of your vision, problem and solution.

To get started:

- Describe the problem you are trying to solve.
- What shared values are compelling action on this problem?
- What are you proposing as a solution?

Next:

- Develop a five-minute (or less) synopsis that describes the problem, solution, shared values and vision.
- Come up with one sentence that describes the problem you are trying to solve and your proposed solution.



Make a rational and emotional case for change

A rational and emotional case for change plays a pivotal role in driving change.⁵ This approach appeals to different personal communication styles of those receiving the information (see Box 2).¹⁸ Emotional elements in communication create a supportive organizational environment that provides space for empathy, compassion and productive conflict.² Further, nurturing a supportive environment creates opportunities for building a shared understanding about health equity concepts and the related organizational change process, and for clarifying any misconceptions that may arise. Rational elements focus on precision, analysis and facts to generate and sustain motivation.

By blending stories and data, organizations can make compelling arguments for health equity capacity and action with internal or external audiences.^{2,5}

Application

- Make the case for change by combining data on and analysis of health inequities with individual and community stories of inequities. It is essential to tell stories in the broader social and economic context that they occur, demonstrate how many people are affected and present systemic solutions to the issues being identified. This shows the audience that change is possible.⁷ Stories and analogies help make the information more relatable to real-life situations.
- Use social math to break down numbers using familiar things or irony to demonstrate impact.^{19,20} Figure 2 illustrates social math using the example of investing in the criminal justice system and investing in housing.
- Tailor messages about the social determinants of health and health equity for different audiences. For example, when speaking with health practitioners, a message such as “Patient care is critical but not enough. We need to address the root causes of the illness” may be relevant. Public sector leaders may better receive the same message as “The costs of ill health are high. We need to keep people from getting sick by focusing on prevention.”

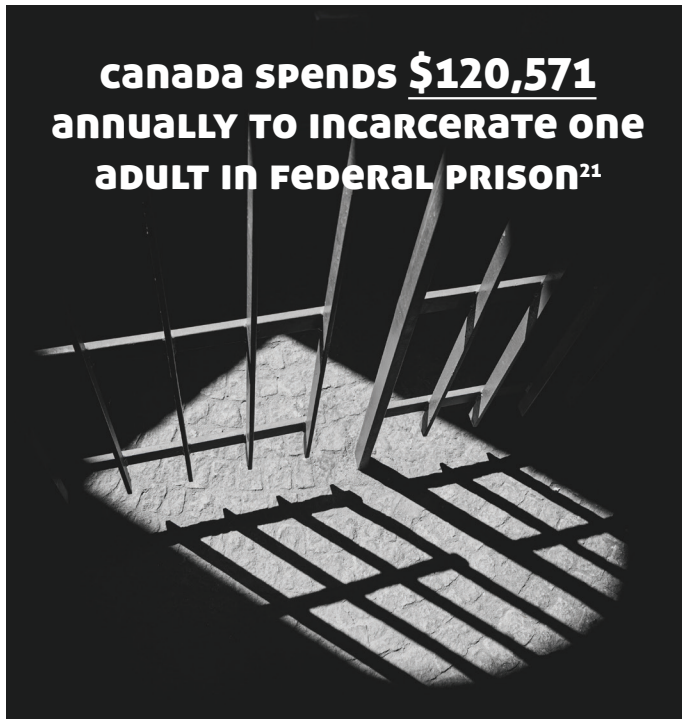
Box 2: Adapting communication for different personal styles¹⁸

Four personal styles affect how people relate to the world around them — analyst, amiable, expressive and driver — and may affect how people react to change projects.

- **Analysts** draw on facts and figures and data.
- **Amiable** styles may respond best to messages that integrate a human dimension and personal stories.
- **Expressive** styles are interested in learning what is new or innovative about the message and tend to be idea oriented.
- **Drivers** place value on action and results, and want to know what actions are going to be taken and when.

Tailoring communication to account for these styles increases the chances of the messages being heard, understood and integrated into practice. Comprehensive communication about health equity needs to include messaging for all four personal styles.

FIGURE 2: EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL MATH — WHERE DO WE INVEST AS A SOCIETY? CRIMINAL JUSTICE OR SAFE HOMES?



Sources: In 2017/18, the cost of keeping an adult in federal custody in Canada was \$120,571.²¹ Housing First, an approach that provides immediate access to permanent housing for people experiencing chronic homelessness, costs on average \$22,257/year for someone with high social needs.²²

Interpret and modify messages at different levels of the organization

Interpersonal, professional and power dynamics influence how change is understood through formal and informal communication. When communicating, there is a need to understand what messages have been received and how they have been interpreted and acted upon. Be attentive to the influence of social interactions through written and spoken communication, discussions, stories, gossip and rumours, and address negative misinterpretations and false information before they become embedded in practice.

Communication during organizational capacity-building for health equity needs to consider and account for:

- vertical, top-down communication from senior leadership that articulates an understanding of planned changes;
- formal verbal and written communications; and
- how senior leaders support individuals' interpretations of changes.⁷

It is important that senior leaders invest time and energy in formal and informal conversations on health equity capacity-building.⁷ Lateral and informal communication between peers shapes interpretation of health equity capacity-building activities and their intended change.² Therefore, formal communications from senior leadership need to complement more active engagement between staff and middle managers to clarify what needs to be achieved.⁷ Another important direction for communication that encourages both understanding and a supportive organizational culture is encouraging feedback from everyone — from front-line staff to upper levels of management — about the impact of organizational change and health equity activities on their daily work.

Application

- Assess and plan for communication-related risks. Consider where these risks might come from — could some information or intent be misunderstood? Identify questions and/or criticisms that might come up that could undermine the vision and goals.¹⁴ What opportunities exist to develop supportive messages to assuage anticipated concerns about impact on daily operations?
- Demonstrate alignment between the interpretations of senior leadership and all those who will be affected by the change.
- Use multiple styles of communication within and between levels of the organization to develop shared meanings and provide multiple opportunities for individuals to come together and share their thoughts and their impressions of the health equity change project.²
- Identify multiple people at all levels of the organization who can communicate the vision and activities clearly and consistently.²

Repeat health equity messages through multiple channels

Repeat key health equity messages across the entire organization using multiple channels to build understanding and buy-in.^{5,23} It is better to overcommunicate during implementation to increase the chances that health equity messages are remembered.²

Application

- Repeat and refine messages through multiple new or existing channels.^{3,8}
- Make it normal to have conversations about health equity at every internal or external organization gathering/ table.
- Allocate time at meetings to allow people to express their views and activities related to health equity and the social determinants of health.²
- Routinely report on health inequities in the community and on action to improve health equity.²
- Use a variety of communication styles and media to enhance more traditional briefing notes and status reports. Arts-based approaches, audio, video, social media, stories, interactive games and role-playing can be innovative ways to communicate.²

Disseminate information about progress

Communicating about progress both internally and externally to the organization helps with buy-in and successful change.⁵ Ongoing communication keeps everyone informed and engaged, supporting understanding that builds over time.¹⁴ Further, regular communication provides an opportunity to celebrate small and large progress and motivates continued investment in health equity.

Application

- Keep an impact log of your health equity activities and process, and share work accomplishments achieved by staff at all levels.²
- Share regular updates with staff on health equity indicators for their communities, relationships built with other sectors and initiatives designed to address the social determinants of health.
- Share progress with external partners, including areas where growth is still required.

Benchmark against rigorous health equity standards and comparable organizations

Organizational investments in health equity capacity can be assessed using benchmarks such as practice standards guided by health equity principles and approaches.²⁴ Making real-world comparisons to other organizations' progress can also contribute to a sense of reasonable urgency and be a powerful motivator for change within an organization.⁵ Public health organizations have to concurrently develop mechanisms for accountability to communities most affected by the inequities.

Application

- Identify how your activities align with rigorous health equity principles and approaches. How has your practice shifted over time?
- Describe how your organization compares to similar organizations with respect to addressing health inequities.
- Conduct comparative analysis of similar regions to identify opportunities for learning and growth.
- Ensure that there are mechanisms in place to be accountable to communities deeply affected by health inequities.

CONCLUSION

Messages about health equity are supported by a range of values, including social justice, solidarity and reciprocity. Compelling messages are most effective when they are explicit about shared values and identify ways that everyone in the organization can contribute. By creating a reasonable sense of urgency and balancing the rational and emotional bases for change, organizations can move forward on a clear vision of action to improve health equity. Communication

approaches that are tailored for different audiences and health equity messages that are repeated consistently will increase the likelihood that messages will be remembered. Communications convey how the organization meets health equity standards to further engender a commitment to and progress on addressing health inequities. Collectively, these strategies support building public health organizational capacity to communicate about health equity and related concepts as well as enhance health equity action.

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