

Designing Effective Communication Strategies

A Strategic Framework

About this paper

Why are effective communication strategies important?

About our strategic frameworks

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This strategic framework was developed during the 6th Meeting on Negotiations entitled *Designing Effective Communication Strategies* held in October/November 2014, in Berlin. It provides an overview of some of the most frequent communication challenges Resistance and Liberation Movements (RLMs) are facing in negotiation processes and ways to tackle them. While in no way exhaustive, we hope that conflict actors find this overview useful both for reflecting on and enhancing their own communication strategies.

Communication is one of the most crucial and cross-cutting elements in negotiations. It is linked to the inherent dilemma to find the right balance between transparency and confidentiality, between building trust and protecting one's interests and members. Reflecting on different communication formats (information dissemination, public relations, lobbying and advocacy, propaganda), target audiences (own constituency, civil society, media and negotiation counterparts as well as the international community), structures and objectives, discussions throughout the meeting made a point for the benefits and opportunities of effective communication strategies. They can:

- ≡ Help reduce the asymmetry at the negotiation table;
- ≡ Increase visibility & credibility;
- ≡ Help reach out and connect to stakeholders;
- ≡ Help achieve a better footprint and consequently more international/financial support.

However, to effectively use communication as a tool in political negotiation processes, RLMs must overcome a number of challenges.

This framework paper raises particularly difficult and relevant questions with regard to:

- ≡ Internal communication: how to overcome challenges related to distance, shifts in strategy, different subgroups (prisoners, diaspora, political or military wing)? How to convince sceptical audiences and transmit credible messages within the own ranks?
- ≡ External communication: how to manage communication with different actors of the international community? How to adapt communication strategies to different actors? How to build up process support through communication initiatives?
- ≡ Managing communication challenges at and around the negotiation table: how to deal with negative (or insufficient) press coverage? How to strike the right balance between the needs for confidentiality and transparency? How to manage public expectations through adequate information dissemination?

Reflecting on these questions, we hope to contribute to more effective negotiation and conflict transformation processes.

As one major output of our annual Meetings on Negotiations, our Strategic Frameworks are practical tools providing a structured and comprehensive overview on different themes related to political negotiations. These papers are based on the input and the discussion among all meeting participants, resource persons and enriched through additional desk-research and literature review. Special note of thanks goes to Jeroen Jansen for his insightful input. Recognising that each conflict scenario and negotiation situation is unique, the aim of these frameworks is not to provide any blue-print solution, but to present some ideas and lessons-learned from different international contexts that can be helpful for developing authentic and case-by-case approaches to negotiation challenges.

Comments and feedback on the Strategic Frameworks to

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BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Five „C`s“ for effective Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Credible - do not undermine your credibility. Facts, statistics and other data presented should be correct. Never twist the truth or tell lies. 2. Comprehensive - cover all aspects of the conflict. Have at least one document that provides background details and a comprehensive picture of the conflict. 3. Consistent - the core messages and information disseminated should be consistent, although the "packaging" might differ depending on the audience. 4. Continuous - frequent and continuous outreach is important. 5. Collaborative - while respecting the independence of the media and other societal stakeholders, operate in a collaborative manner, establishing professional relationships and permanent contacts that will result in respect and empathy.
No propaganda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Propaganda is not part of the five “C`s” framework of effective communication. ≡ Movements should invest in proper communication campaigns based on credibility and ... ≡ ... expose propaganda of the “other side”.

DESIGNING COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES AND STRATEGIES

Five steps for setting-up a communication structure and team	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take stock and define your objectives: how effective is the current communication strategy? Is there sufficient well-qualified staff? What are the existing media relationships? What are the strategy’s strengths and shortcomings? While such stock-tacking exercises can be conducted internally, external support (if possible with regard to security issues) might provide a more objective and professional assessment. 2. Devise both internal and external communication strategies that include appropriate risk analysis (leakage, negative media coverage, management of expectations). 3. Create a physical (most recommendable) or virtual press, media and information office where equipment to the media team as well as training can be made available. 4. Set-up a manageable communication team consisting of a charismatic spokesperson, a deputy spokesperson (responsible for liaison with the political leadership), media experts to monitor and analyse domestic and international media, personal responsible for drafting press releases and writing statements and speeches. Support by IT experts is needed in order to keep the website and the social media up to date; while the content should be produced by the rest of the team. Finally, one person should be assigned the task of organizing press conferences etc. targeting international and domestic press. 5. Regularly revise and adapt your communication structures to negotiation process (defining mandate, responsibilities, and coordination mechanisms).
Mapping and approaching different audiences and communication channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Audiences can range from the media to institutional counterparts, including other governments, international and regional organizations, or other networks. An analysis of audiences should distinguish friendly from hostile audiences, public opinion from institutional actors, and national from international actors. While the facts that were communicated should always remain the same, the communication format must be adapted to each of these different audiences. ≡ Try to create external support on various levels while being aware of the different tasks (and limitations) third party interveners can fulfil. A mapping exercise can help clarify who can best serve as observers, facilitators, mediators, guarantors of the process, or “groups of friends” supporting the process. ≡ Make use of third parties to convey your key message. ≡ Do media analysis regularly: be aware about how you are portrayed in different media/by different actors.
Developing relevant media material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Once negotiations start, there will be heavy request for additional information and you will have to respond to it quickly. ≡ Keep your website topical and prepare coherent and up-dated information on the most important topics and principles, including fact sheets, briefing notes including video/audio content, press releases/ statements (adapted to key audience) and the biographies/mappings of your political and other key leaders. Mapping the leaders of the “other side” will strengthen your conflict analysis.

DEALING WITH COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES IN NEGOTIATIONS ...

... AND HOW TO RESPOND TO THEM

Internal communication challenges

- ≡ Lack of internal cohesion or coordination – the difficulty to speak with “one voice” - within the different departments of one movement (e.g. between the negotiation team, communication team, political department, international department) or among different actors in a coalition is a frequent problem leading to incoherent communication.
- ≡ Other problems are related to distance and lack of possibilities to communicate/convey messages, including language barriers as well as the lack of both capacities and skills and financial and technical resources.

- » Define clear mandates and responsibilities; identify one charismatic spokesperson in charge of communicating key messages.
- » Develop clear written statements conveying your key principles and messages that can be diffused by different departments of the movement and its coalition partners. Use (alternative) mass media to clearly communicate demands and objectives. Advocating the cause not only locally but also regionally and internationally can help diffuse preconceptions and propaganda.
- » Invest in educating your own members about the peace process and its benefits and challenges.

How to find the right balance between confidentiality and transparency?

- ≡ The degree of discretion and, if necessary, secrecy must be analysed on a case-by- case basis and will influence the communication strategy. An excess of publicity of the negotiations can be detrimental by directly affecting the actors’ flexibility and by fostering aggressive negotiation positions. On the other hand, a lack of media coverage can prevent public awareness and thus, support to the process.
- ≡ Against this background, how to find the right balance between confidentiality and transparency? How to deal with mismanagement of information exchange with negotiation counterparts, such as leakages?

- » It might be advisable to opt for a two-phased approach if trust is low at the beginning of a process. In this situation, delegations can start with discreet talks respecting the need for confidentiality and slow trust-building followed by a more open, transparent and inclusive phase. It is a strategic decision to decide what information should be shared and must be carefully assessed. If tensions are high information exchange can be done through the press or through mediators.
- » At the table, information dissemination policies are essential to the quality of the negotiation and powerful trust-building tools. The risk of leakages can be reduced by keeping negotiation delegations in a controllable size (or break-up into thematic commissions), issuing joint communiqués with a clear message, ensuring unity with regard to main positions within the movement, and/or establishing clear (and binding) ground rules (e.g. such as Chatham House rules, agreements on how to deal with press inquiries etc.).

How to deal with hardliner statements?

- ≡ Managing positional negotiators: How to deal with hardliner statements both from the other and one’s own side?
- ≡ Dealing with hardliners can be particularly challenging when negotiation delegations are quite big or represent different wings of one movement. Negotiators might tend to speak to these different voices of their own movement (e.g. satisfying hardliners in public speeches) rather than engaging in a dialogue with the “other side”.

- » In such a situation, it can be particularly helpful to set-up informal negotiation spaces that counter the negative effect of public hardliner statements. Discussions off-room, coffee breaks, private spaces or joint social activities provide safe spaces where discreet offers can be made without losing face. In that sense, they are a very helpful complement to official talks even though they cannot replace them. Returning to the official negotiation table once having reached a private agreement increases legitimacy and transparency of the process.
- » In addition, the right choice of the facilitators / chairperson(s) of the process can be a powerful instrument to help trust-building. (S)he must possess sound soft skills, being able to contribute to the trust-building process through active listening, being approachable by all parties and creating clear communication.

<p>How to avoid communication break-down?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ How to react in the absence or break-down of official communication channels? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Establish and maintain different tracks of communication with your constituency and your counterpart. Include informal/back-channel contacts that can be used as safety-nets to maintain communication in case the official channel breaks down.
<p>How to deal with a difficult media environment?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Polarization of public opinion and little “objective” media coverage within the country are a common consequence of violent conflict. ≡ Counterbalancing this situation is very difficult, because negotiation processes are often characterised by a structural asymmetry whereby usually governments have more resources and access to (inter)national media, often control (or even close down) media outlets resulting in further biased (or no) media coverage and no or weak direct access to media for RLMs. ≡ In addition, keeping media interested in one’s cause and conflict can be a real challenge, especially if progress is slow and no “big events” are happening to attract media attention. In such a situation, how to deal with disinterested (and at times unprofessional) media, how to keep media coverage intact? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Establish a parallel set of (alternative) media. Traditional mainstream media (newspapers, TV, radio) and the “terrorist” label are countered best by social media including credible websites, blogs and twitter accounts. Of course, this is only feasible if the security risk for those behind these sites is manageable. Keep up-to-date with new technologies and make use of them. Use diverse channels including cultural activities and festivities in a creative manner to convey key messages (film and food festivals, music, theatre etc.) » Also think about how diaspora members of your movement can be helpful in disseminating alternative discourses on the conflict, at least abroad and collaborate with grass-roots organisations as well as international experts (e.g. on the issues of rule of law, human rights, fundamental freedoms) to position your agenda points. However, the communication policy of the Diaspora organisations has to be carefully managed so that they don’t contribute to the exacerbation of the conflict or increase the polarization. » Identify priority contacts (e.g. press agencies, key media and academic experts, think tanks and opponents) and establish robust personal/professional relationships with them. Keep these relationships alive by offering these networks something in terms of public diplomacy, e.g. fora, discussion events, seminars, and campaigning events related to your key principles. Combine pro-active (attracting media attention for certain topics) and re-active (countering hostile media coverage) communication. » Conduct regular media monitoring (collecting, analysing and reporting on media coverage of one’s case) to be aware about the deficits and blind spots of the media coverage. React accordingly. » Despite the difficult situation: do not fall into the “propaganda trap” but make use of your “moral upper hand” (“fighting for the people”) and communicate accordingly.
<p>Security and safety issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Security/safety issues for negotiations delegation members and their communication (interception of conversations/phone calls etc.) but also security concerns for journalists or social activists and hence restricted possibility to use certain media (e.g. social media) are a serious challenge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » As every conflict is unique, there are no universal recommendations for this but each movement has to find its own creative ways to adapt communication strategies to restrictions imposed by the clandestine/illegal nature of the movements. There are however now a number of international initiatives seeking to improve security for human rights defenders and social activists which can be used to at least partly protect movements’ social bases.

11 LESSONS-LEARNED / BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES

1. Do not fall into the “propaganda trap” but make use of your “moral upper hand” when it comes to your political programme (“fighting for the people”) and communicate accordingly.
2. Establish a professional communication department within your technical secretariat for the negotiations to channel external communication effectively
3. Diversify your communication channels, including radio, TV, newspapers, webpages, and social media.
4. Establish multi-level targeted communication strategy addressing both local/national and international audiences.
5. Explore the opportunities of social media as alternative communication channel.
6. Generate additional media coverage and support by diaspora groups or international groups of friends.
7. Don’t think about communication as an isolated terrain of action but combine and reinforce your communication/media work with other activities (e.g. public diplomacy, cultural events etc.).
8. Conduct regular/routine briefings for diplomats to orientate the perspective of outsiders on the peace process.
9. Let others reinforce your message: getting independent media to report on your movement in a positive /objective way can strongly enhance your credibility. Make sure “neutral” third parties/journalists/ observers have access to reliable information on your movement.
10. Invest in your communication team and make use of the media trainings offered by many international organizations/foundations.
11. Be coherent in your message and your action: act accordingly to your statements demonstrating that they are not “empty words”.



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