

UBC Graduate Students' Society
Capilano College Students' Union
Cariboo College Students' Society
David Thompson Student Society
Douglas College Student Society
Emily Carr Student Association
King Edward Student Association
Kwantlen College Student Association
Langara Student Society
Malaspina College Student Society
Northwest College Student Association
Okanagan College Student Association -
Kelowna
Selkirk College Student Society
Simon Fraser Student Society
University of Victoria Alma Mater Society
VVI Student Association

8th Semi-Annual Pacific Region General Meeting

Communications

Communication Committee

This is a new committee created by the executive. It was felt that such a committee was needed to improve the communications between the local, provincial and national offices.

The committee might want to first take the time to read the following chapter on communications that was written by Si Kahn. This article would be a good basis from which to start the committee's discussion.

The committee might want to look at the current problem of materials distribution and come up with ways in which the materials that are produced can be used more effectively. Specifically, the B.C. Student needs to be looked at with an eye towards any changes that should take place in format, the amount of copies being produced, plus a look at the whole question of whether-or-not it should be produced at all.

Information from locals should also be studied. What types of information locals want researched and how locals will be able to assist in data collection of such projects.

The committee should also be looking at the current practices of the Federation's offices (ie. local, provincial, national) in communicating to the membership. The committee might want to deal with such questions as:

- a) Are the current materials produced by the Federation fulfilling our needs?
- b) how are our media relations and how can they be improved?
- c) Should we be focusing on media at all or are there better ways to communicate to the membership and the community?
- d) Should we be producing more materials that will force student activists to have more personal contact with other students such as leaflets, etc...

The committee should read the materials first and then set an agenda.

12. Communication

COMMUNICATION is a long word for all the different ways in which people can relate to each other. Organizing and leadership depend heavily on communication. The ability of leaders to listen, to understand what people are saying, and to make sure they have the chance to say what's on their minds, builds grass roots democracy. Communication involves other members of the group in the organization. It gives them a stake in what happens. Communication is the glue that holds our organizations together.

Why should an organization have a communication strategy?

An organization needs to have its own communication strategy. The first question to ask in putting together such a strategy is "Who are we communicating with?" Within the organization the leaders need to be informed regularly of decisions that are being made and responsibilities that need to be carried out. Other members, who may be less involved day-to-day, still need to know what's going on and to feel a part of it.

We also want to reach those people we see as possible new members of the organization, and the people who are members of organizations that are allies or members of coalitions with us. There is also the opposition, the people we are fighting, whose decisions we want to influence. We need to impress them with our power.

In each case we need to communicate with a group, but we need to do it strategically. It's simply not true that the more people know about us and our issues the better off we are. We need to get away from the idea that information in itself is good. Instead, we should concentrate on getting the right information to the right people at the right time—through our communication strategy.

Who is responsible for the communication strategy?

Because communication does need to be strategic, it makes sense to have a communications committee that takes responsibility for it. Such a committee needs to make a number of decisions. It needs to target who it is that our communication is aimed at. Are we trying to reach our own supporters and members ("internal communication")? Are we trying to influence people outside the organization ("external communication"): the opposition, politicians, allies, members of coalitions, funding sources, legislators?

To create our strategy, our communications committee needs to ask some basic questions:

- (1) Who is it that we're trying to reach with this particular system of communication?
- (2) What is the most effective method of reaching this particular group?
- (3) What is the cost of what we're proposing to do relative to what we are expecting from it?

(4) Exactly what is it we want out of this type of communication?

(5) What are we trying to motivate people to do?

(6) Who should work on what?

Meetings should be part of our communication strategy. Small meetings, house meetings, committee meetings, rallies, mass meetings all have a role to play within an organization's communications. We need to look carefully at the balance of methods we're using for trying to communicate both internally and externally and evaluate how effectively they're working.

Finally, we need to involve the members in our communication strategy as much as possible. Communication all too often becomes a staff specialty: One staff person writes the newsletter and makes most of the phone calls, and another writes all the leaflets. It is very important to spread these responsibilities out in our organizations. The more skills the leaders and members develop, the better—and the more likely it is that they will stay involved in the organization.

What is an organization's best form of communication?

Corporations, politicians, and others have long used a variety of communication devices to manipulate us and keep us unorganized. They have convinced "producers" to work harder, faster, and cheaper in order to get them to accept the decisions of management. They have told "consumers" which soap to buy, which car to choose, which candidate to vote for. They have carefully used communication techniques—including everything from behavior modification to video programming—to get their messages across.

But there's one major communication method where our organizations have the upper hand: person-to-person contact.

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What is person-to-person contact?

Person-to-person contact is one of the great strengths of organizing. It is one of the things that offers the possibility of overcoming corporate power in the long run. The corporations only have billions of dollars. They do not have the number of people that are involved or could be involved in people's organizations.

For this reason, in developing a communication strategy for our organization, we want to rely as heavily as possible on person-to-person contact. Person-to-person communication carries the message that we see people as individuals, not simply as consumers or producers. When we communicate person-to-person we say that each person's ideas are valuable, that each person should have control of his or her life.

Suppose you're walking through your neighborhood shopping center on a Saturday afternoon. Someone walks up to you, looks you in the eye, and says, "Hi. I'm Si Kahn. I'm a member of the Eastside Community Organization. We're trying to do something about hiring policies in this shopping center that discriminate against women and minorities. We'd like you to read this petition and sign it if you agree with us." You may or may not decide to sign. But you're more likely to do something than if you just found a leaflet tucked under your windshield wiper when you came out of the supermarket.

The personal reinforces the impersonal. What is said to you is simple. It covers four basic points:

- (1) I am.
- (2) We are.
- (3) We do.
- (4) We want.

But because you hear these four key points from a real live person standing in a shopping center and not from a television announcer, they may move you into action.

We can extend this idea to many of the situations in our orga-

nizing. For example, let's say that the leaders of the organization have targeted a neighborhood as a place to build a chapter. As they go door-to-door, it's helpful to have along with them a piece of printed literature about the organization, telling how it got started, some of the things it's done, how to become a member, and what members do. Often when we talk to people face-to-face we give them a lot of information at one time. Sometimes this is more than they can think about at the time. If we have a printed piece to leave behind, they have the chance to reflect on and absorb the information. We are most effective when we consider people's needs just as we do our purposes.

How does an organization get and keep contact?

The realities of numbers may make continued face-to-face contact impossible. In an organization of thousands of members, it is difficult even with the best leadership to see everyone once a month. Most leaders cannot work full-time as organizers. One of the ways of adjusting our resources to the need is to rely most heavily on person-to-person contact to recruit people into the organization. Once contact has been established face-to-face, it can be more easily kept up in other ways: telephone calls, small group meetings, letters, and newsletters.

The telephone is excellent for keeping in touch. If the president of a people's organization calls his or her board members and committee chairpeople every week or so just to touch base with them, it will add to how much these people feel a part of the organization. It will also solidify the political position of that president.

The telephone can also be used to notify the members of the organization of an action that is coming up, a decision that was taken by the executive committee that people should know about, or a new move by the opposition that needs to be talked through and considered.

Sometimes the telephone is used simply to influence or per-

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suade. For example, during an election campaign an organization might put together a phone bank. A phone bank is a group of people sitting together in a room with many telephones, calling voters and trying to persuade them to vote for a particular candidate. Because phone banks involve group activity, they build the organization better than if the same people made these calls from their homes.

The telephone in a way represents person-to-person communication. The other kinds of communication many grassroots organizations use—pamphlets, leaflets, bumper stickers, buttons, mailings—are less personal, but still useful.

How can an organization use literature most effectively?

The literature we pass out about our organization and its work is a very important part of bringing in new members. The people we have met person-to-person will want to know more about us, and leaflets give them some background on our efforts. Letters and newsletters keep members informed about upcoming events and recent developments. Though literature is generally less effective than person-to-person contact, it still plays an important part in our communication strategy.

Literature is often best produced by groups. Suppose some people sit down together as a group and say, "What is it that we want people to do as a result of this leaflet? What's the best way of catching their attention? What's a good line that would make them read this?" They're likely to come up with a much better leaflet or newsletter than if one person sits down and writes it.

Groups of people also tend to notice the faults that our leaflets so often have: too many words, not enough "white" or blank space, not enough graphics or photographs. As in so many areas of our organizing, the group process will work better than the individual process.

If an organization does rely on leaflets as part of its com-

munication strategy, the following "tricks of the trade" can be helpful:

- (1) Use different colors of paper for different leaflets.
- (2) Use large print for the headlines—as large as will fit on the page.
- (3) Use three or four headlines on the page. Write them so that if people only read the headlines they still get the main message of the leaflet.
- (4) Use simple words. Write the way people talk.
- (5) Don't crowd the leaflet too much. Leave big margins and lots of blank space.
- (6) Use cartoons, photographs, and drawings to help catch people's attention.
- (7) Keep everything short: headlines, sentences, words, paragraphs.
- (8) Use local names when possible.
- (9) Make sure the leaflet asks people to *do* something.
- (10) Keep track of how many leaflets are printed each time. This helps you plan and saves money.
- (11) Save the layout. The graphics and headlines can be reused.
- (12) Ask the printer to return or save the negatives. This saves money if you have to reprint.
- (13) Try to make sure there's a "union bug" on the leaflet, especially if you're working in coalition with unions.
- (14) Make up a map of the community showing where leaflets can be posted without asking permission each time: bulletin boards, restaurants, schools, laundromats. You can give this map and a stack of leaflets to a member to distribute.

How can an organization evaluate its communication work?

Too often in an organization, we make decisions and carry them out without ever attempting to evaluate what has happened. As a

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result tremendous amounts of energy often go into forms of communication that may not be accomplishing what we want them to do. It makes sense for the communications committee to take on as part of its responsibility the evaluation of our communications.

It's not unusual for someone watching a television program about tax abuses to become very angry, then to feel on account of that anger that he has accomplished something, when he has really done nothing to change the situation. That is not what we want. We want people to think and feel, but we also want them to act. If we pass out a leaflet to a thousand people in our community telling them about the danger of having an expressway built through the neighborhood, but not asking them to do anything, we have no real way of judging how it affected their thinking unless people go around and see them afterward. If people are going to go around and see them anyway, there is no point in taking the time and energy necessary to leaflet that many people. But if the leaflet asks all of them to come to a meeting the next night at seven o'clock, we can count the number of people there. We can ask them at the door whether they came because of the leaflet. We can compare that with past attendance at meetings. In this way we can determine if the method of communicating that we have chosen to use is effective: Has it helped people to act?

As organizations develop we have a tendency to move more to the less personal types of communication. In the beginning most organizations put most of their time into door-to-door work, person-to-person contacts, house meetings, and small group meetings. As time goes on and organizations become larger they rely more on their newsletters, mailings, leaflets, posters, and stories in the press and on the public media as a way of informing their members. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of all these impersonal techniques, we need to go back to the person-to-person contacts. It may take sitting down with people individually or in small groups to ask the same questions about how our methods of communication affect them.

A communications committee might want to survey part of

the membership to determine what kinds of communication work best with them. Do they read the newsletter? Do they read the mailings? Do they come to the meetings? What does reading the newsletter do for them? Does it make them feel that they have carried out all of their membership responsibilities? Does it make them feel more like participating in activities that the organization sponsors? Only when we begin to understand which methods of communication are actually motivating our organization's members into action can we make good judgments about where to focus time and energy.

How does communication build the organization?

We want to be careful not to see communication in too narrow a sense. We want to look at the full range of ways in which people communicate with each other, at the full range of things that can be communicated: not just information but motivation, not just knowledge but spirit, not just strategy but solidarity. In many ways what we say we are and who we say we are, are a part of what we become. A broad communication strategy which takes into account all of the different ways in which people talk and listen to each other can tremendously strengthen our organizations.

Communication plays a critical role in shaping who we are and what we do. To some extent we become what we say we are. The way we describe our organization—its function, its history, its plans, its priorities—influences the kinds of members we attract, who in turn will reinforce the aspects of the organization which attracted them. As a result there is a real political decision made whenever we describe the organization and its functions to people. When we talk about members and what they do, we are also saying what we think members should be like. When we spotlight our leaders and talk about their lives and what role they play in the organization, we are also saying to other members that this is what an individual should do if he or she wants to be a leader.

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For this reason we need to be conscious that our system of communication has a political role as well. It's not simply conveying information. It's creating expectations that the organization will have to live with. Whatever methods of communication we choose to use, one of the important rules is that they should build the collective process, that they should encourage people to work together, to do things together, to learn to rely on each other, to achieve interdependence.

Communication also builds more than just knowledge and action. It should build spirit and solidarity, a sense of belonging to the organization, of being a part of what the organization is and does. We need to broaden our sense of communication to know that it goes beyond meetings. It needs to dig roots in the culture within which we're working.

There are many ways of doing this kind of communication. Music is an important tool—people singing together, people writing their own songs and performing them. Theater, done both by others and by ourselves, builds a sense of spirit. Special events and celebrations are also forms of communication. All of the different types of art, of writing, of telling stories can contribute to the strength we need to build and keep organizations.

13. Media

MEDIA IS A WORD used to describe public forms of communication. Usually by *media* we mean newspapers, radio, and television. The word *media* is used mostly by people who don't work in the media, since people who work in newspapers, radio, and television often don't like to be lumped together and would rather have you talk about each of their specialties by name.

Using the media for external communication is a basic organizing skill. The key to learning this skill is understanding that, as with so many other aspects of organizing, media use has to be part of a well-thought-out strategy. It's not just a question of how you get the publicity for your organization, but of how this fits in with the other needs you have. It's important that we use the media and that the media not use us.

Why do we want to have the media involved?

There are a number of possible advantages to media coverage of an organization and its activities. Media coverage is a way of

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