Internal Communication Guide

VillageReach®
Starting at the Last Mile

Internal Communication at VillageReach

Internal communication is a foundational aspect of VillageReach's organizational culture. Our capacity to skillfully communicate with one another is critical for helping us foster mutual understanding, trust and respect. **At VillageReach, we rely on strong communication practices to achieve our organizational values of Diversity & Inclusion, Innovation, Collaboration and Excellence.** VillageReach is committed to ensuring that our varied voices and views are heard and respected. To realize this, we must all invest the necessary effort to cultivate a productive and collaborative communication environment.

This document aims to:

- Clearly articulate the VillageReach internal communication vision.
- Recommend actionable strategies and resources that support the realization of this vision.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION SUPPORTS OUR ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

A communicative work environment supports us to have the information we need in order to uphold the VillageReach values of **Diversity & Inclusion, Innovation, Collaboration** and **Excellence** *(Figure 1)*.

Figure 1: Organizational Values

Diversity and Inclusion
Equitable participation enhances our collective impact.

Innovation
Creativity and fearless exploration foster lasting change.

Collaboration
Strong partnerships built on trust are vital to our mission.

Excellence
Integrity, experience and continuous learning drive quality results.

Effective internal communication promotes organizational excellence by making space for team members to feel included, heard, respected and valued.[1] Inclusivity and mutual respect lay the foundation for stronger working relationships and collaboration.[2] When we collaborate with people who have different experiences from us, it challenges us to think outside the box and anticipate alternative viewpoints.[3]

Using strong communication practices that uphold our organizational values helps us to make progress towards realizing our organizational mission to save lives and improve health.

VILLAGEREACH PRINCIPLES FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Some of the most successful companies establish a workforce that has a unified understanding of their organization's mission, goals and values.[4] The shared understanding essentially refers to an organizational culture. Creating coherence in our internal communication culture and principles helps us to work in more coordinated and impactful ways.

The purpose of establishing a shared organizational communication culture is not to control or micromanage employees, but rather, to promote success with clearly defined expectations about how we can communicate and collaborate. When we are united in our vision about the communication environment we aim to achieve, we set the stage for deeper collaborations that demonstrate a shared commitment to our organizational culture and mission.

Internal Communication – An Overview

Our principles for internal communication establish standards for the ways in which we interact with one another. VillageReach's internal communication principles include the following:

1	Respect and embrace perspective differences.
2	Challenge your own biases and assumptions.
3	Actively consider how your actions impact others.
4	Invest the time and attention that your colleagues merit.
5	Be authentic. Say what you mean and do what you say.

These five principles guide us to establish healthy team norms, behaviors and practices.

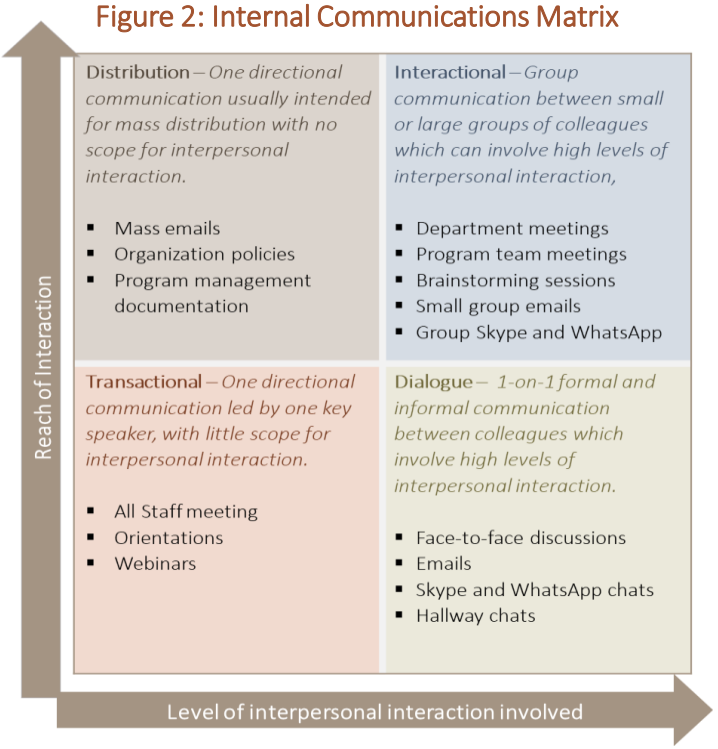
WHAT IS INTERNAL COMMUNICATION?

Internal communication refers to all interactions—both formal and informal—that help us share information from one person to another within our organization. As a global organization, we interact in a variety of ways and for many different reasons. The key approaches that we use to share information are outlined in the internal communications matrix on the right. *(Figure 2)*.

Regardless of the type of interaction, it is important that we practice skillful communication. Achieving this within a global organization and with a diverse workforce requires intentionality and flexibility when it comes to:

- who we choose to include in our teams.
- when we engage our collaborators.
- how we communicate with one another.
- which channels we use to send and receive information.

Figure 2: Internal Communications Matrix

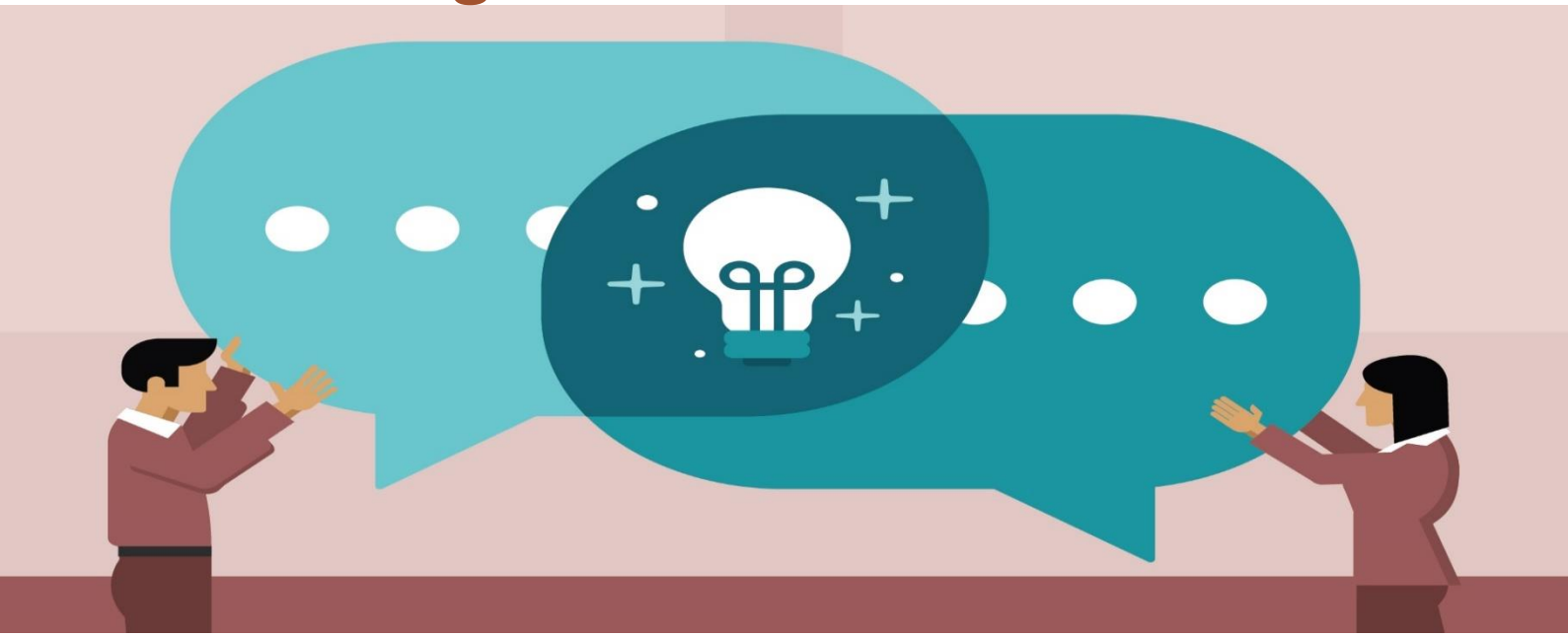


At VillageReach, we work to foster a communicative and collaborative environment by:

1. **Upholding inclusivity in access to information and ideas within the organization.**
   We strive for equal access to information so that everyone within the organization is empowered to make meaningful contributions and excel in their roles. This involves promoting multidirectional and equitable communication practices within and between all VillageReach offices.

2. **Creating and maintaining respectful internal communication standards.**
   We strive to communicate with one another in ways that honor our geographical and experiential diversity. This involves being patient and flexible to better accommodate differences (e.g., time zone, communication style, connectivity infrastructure etc.).

It takes a Village to Reach our Vision

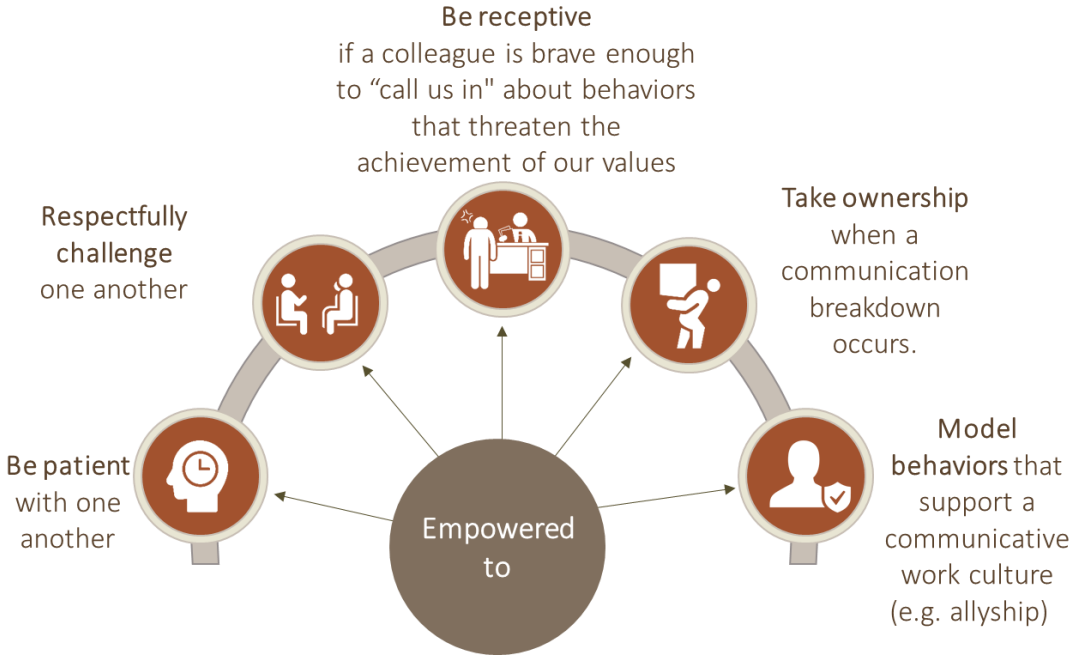


IMPACTFUL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

Establishing an effective internal communication environment is not one person's job—it is a shared responsibility. If we want to be acknowledged, heard and understood by others, we must invest the necessary time and energy towards clearly articulating our needs and expectations. Furthermore, to best leverage the diverse experiences and perspectives that our teams possess, we must be prepared to listen, learn and make space for others to make meaningful contributions. Achieving an enabling communication environment is not something that can or should happen overnight—it requires long term, devoted and sustained commitment. Although it can be challenging, we accept the challenge of working harder and better—together.

Fine-tuning our communication skills and processes enables us to be better collaborators.[5,6] These skills also support us in achieving our organizational goals. We envision an internal communication environment that supports a culture of accountability by empowering employees to take the actions listed below *(Figure 3)*.

Figure 3. All employees should be empowered to



Challenges to Internal Communication

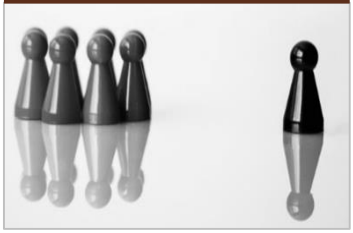
In order to invest in more impactful collaboration, it is important to recognize the factors that both hinder and enable strong teamwork. In this section, we explore the key challenges to communicating skillfully. These barriers can limit our progress towards achieving our organizational goals and honoring our values of diversity and inclusion. The subsequent sections also offer strategies for reflecting upon, avoiding and lessening the impact of these challenges.

BIAS, INVALIDATION & EXCLUSION ARE CHALLENGES TO INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Unconscious Bias

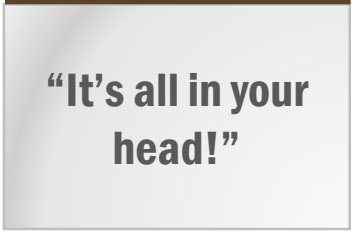
Bias is a prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person or group compared with another.[7] Often, biases manifest in a manner that may be considered unfair. Biases may be held by an individual, group or institution and can have negative or positive consequences. Unconscious bias refers to **biases that we are unaware of** but that still very much shape our thoughts about a person, place or a group of people.[8]

Exclusion



We exclude others by **under-appreciating them, not being mindful of our dispersed geography and time zone differences, or outright omitting them from certain situations or communications** (e.g. hallway chats, emails or meetings). This can leave the person on receiving end feeling disadvantaged or as though opportunities afforded to others are not afforded to them. It could also lead them to think that their capabilities and opinions are not valued in the organization.[9]

Invalidation



Everyone has biases. Unfortunately, these biases can manifest as actions that make others feel excluded, insignificant and even traumatized. **We invalidate others when we reject, judge or fail to acknowledge their experiences, thoughts and/or feelings**. Invalidating the experiences of others is a threat to collaboration because it can make others feel unsafe when it comes to sharing their opinions. Additionally, invalidation shuts down conversations about difference before they can even start.

Figure 4: Resources for Unconscious Bias

Unconscious Bias

Consider:

- Do you feel more comfortable when differences (e.g. racial, gender, generational, religious etc.) are not acknowledged?
- How might you perpetuate stereotypes through your thoughts and actions?
  - *E.g. Are there words I use to describe the behavior and performance of people from Group X that I do not use to describe the behavior and performance of people from Group Y?*
- How do you demonstrate interest in learning more about your colleagues' experience?
  - *E.g. Do you ask, "I recognize that this has been my experience in our organization. What has your experience been?"*
- Who are your go-to people for: a working lunch? group projects? stretch opportunities?

Food for thought:

- ❑ Check our bias to wreck our bias.
- ❑ Talking about bias in a respectful way.

Challenges to Internal Communication

HOW DO THESE CHALLENGES SHOW UP AT WORK?

Unconscious Bias

The concept of "having bias" can understandably make some of us feel uncomfortable or defensive. But bias on its own is not inherently good or bad. Bias is simply a mechanism that helps our brains to organize and categorize the incredible quantity of information that we are bombarded with every day of our lives. Every single one of us is biased. In fact, the question is not whether or not we have biases, but what those biases are and how they impact our actions. Our unconscious biases may not be in alignment with the beliefs we publicly endorse.[10] Still, unconscious biases can manifest in the language we use (e.g. identifying a person's race or alluding to it in some other way when it is not pertinent to the conversation), the attitudes we exhibit and the actions we take (e.g. when we choose to work exclusively with colleagues of a certain gender, race, age etc.).

Exclusion

Actions such as leaving someone off an email chain, not engaging with remote colleagues with the same intensity and intentionality as local colleagues, ignoring someone's morning greeting or not inviting someone to join your team may seem relatively benign. However, these actions can have a real and lasting impact on our coworkers and on our work products. Workplace exclusion creates an atmosphere where people can feel isolated, unseen, unwelcome and undervalued. Unconscious biases may contribute towards the exclusion of others from their teams, conversations and decision-making processes. Below, we outline the two key forms of exclusion and provide examples of how they manifest.

Physical exclusion

- *Discussing programmatic work informally (e.g., at the coffee station) can exclude remote or other non-participating employees.*
- *Failing to reflect deeply on who should be copied on emails or invited to meetings, etc.*
- *Gravitating towards those we normally work with when putting together a new team.*

Social exclusion

- *Starting meetings with an ice-breaker with references mostly accessible, known, or relevant to dominant office culture (e.g. what is your favorite college football team?).*
- *Organizing work social events with times or activities that make it challenging for some to participate (e.g. childcare scheduling, alcohol-centered social events, physically intensive activities).*

Invalidation

We invalidate others when we fail to acknowledge that they are entering into an interaction with experiences that may differ from our own. Our physical and verbal behaviors (e.g. rolling one's eyes, body language, tone of voice or actively telling someone that their perception or experiences are "wrong") can make others feel invalidated. The impact of our actions can be harmful, even if our intention was positive. Even if someone mistakenly thinks that they have been discriminated against or invalidated, this misperception can impact their job satisfaction, mental health and work performance.[11] Counteracting invalidation can be difficult because we are often unaware of the ways in which we might be invalidating others. Below, we outline different examples of invalidating comments:

Being defensive

- *Some of my best friends are *insert identifier*.*
- *I really think that you're taking this the wrong way.*
- *I'm not racist because I am also a migrant and am *insert identifier*.*

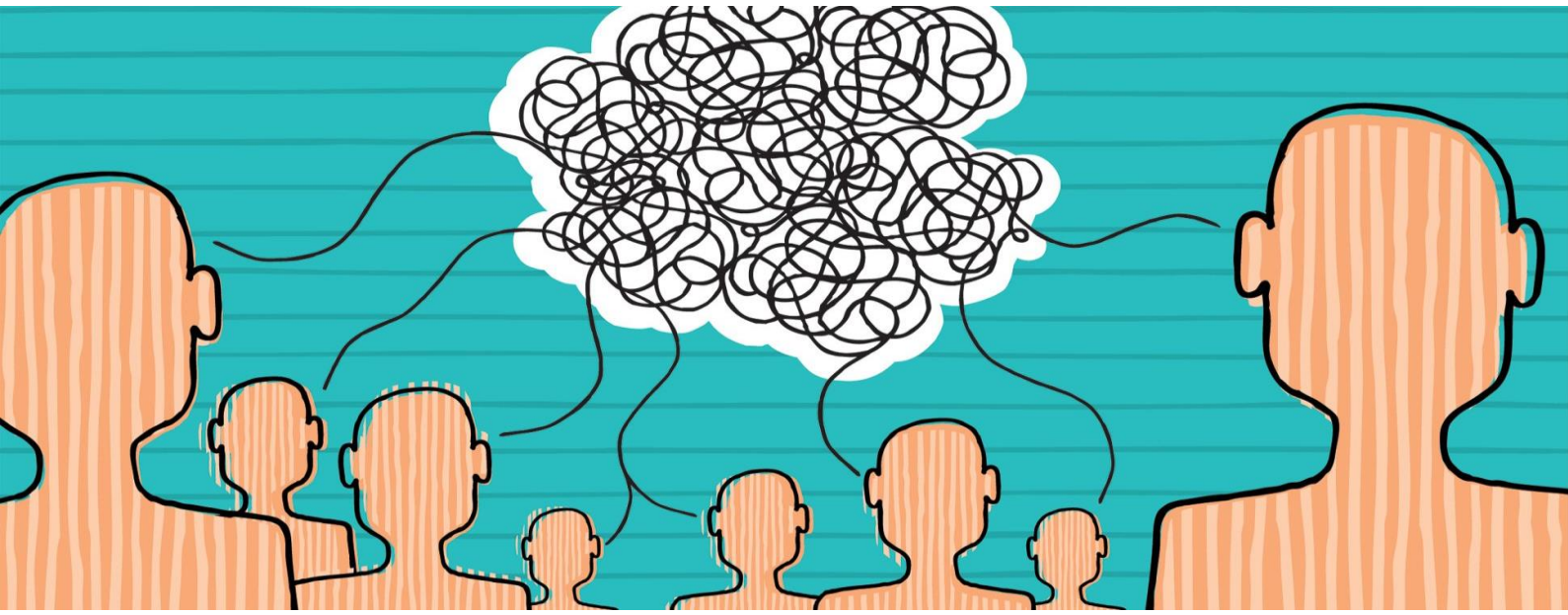
Judging

- *You are being too sensitive.*
- *He was completely over-reacting in that meeting.*
- *Wow! You really can't take a joke.*

Telling people what to do

- *This is a great professional opportunity. You should stop complaining.*
- *Don't let that bother you.*

Challenges to Internal Communication



HOW DO THESE CHALLENGES SHOW UP AT WORK?

When it comes to bias, invalidation and exclusion, it's important to prioritize impact over intentions. Communication exchanges with people can sometimes miss the mark and leave us feeling hurt, unsupported, rejected and frustrated. Unconscious biases can affect the way we view and talk about the our global workforce and the communities we aim to serve. If we use language that devalues the communities and competencies of our global workforce, we also devalue ourselves. Using devaluing language to describe local conditions and local capabilities in the countries where we work can also inadvertently perpetuate harmful stereotypes and compromise our relationships and reputation. If we allow unconscious bias to influence our daily work, we can end up making poor programmatic decisions that ultimately diminish our collective impact.

All of us can unintentionally invalidate and exclude others. Often, instances of invalidation and exclusion come from a misalignment between the intention and the impact, or perception, of a message. Although we may have the best of intentions, our messages can still sometimes get lost in translation. When we act on our unconscious biases and invalidate or exclude others, we can make them feel alienated. When people are negatively impacted by bias, they may feel as though they have to work extra hard in order to demonstrate their value to the group. Ultimately, the stress of dealing with biases, invalidation and exclusion is everyone's problem because it can lower morale, hamper creativity and diminish a person's ability to thrive and make meaningful contributions.[12] Bias can also impact job satisfaction and employee retention.[13]

We can counteract these negative effects by being more mindful about how we work together. This can be achieved by listening to, empathizing with and acknowledging others without minimizing their experiences or being combative. Skillful communication is about building trust and creating an environment that enables all of us to support the achievement of our organizational goals.

Figure 5: Resources for Invalidation & Exclusion

Invalidation & Exclusion

Food for thought:

- ❑ Intent vs Impact: How do you communicate?
- ❑ Intent isn't everything: 7 ways to inadvertently invalidate feelings.
- ❑ Who's being left out of your team?
- ❑ The hidden cost of workplace exclusion
- ❑ Why social pain hurts your workplace performance (and how to avoid it).

Addressing Internal Communication Challenges

A key aspect of being a successful communicator is building the necessary skills to identify and ultimately disrupt harmful and ineffective communication practices. We cannot always guarantee that another person is going to understand what we are trying to affect others. This document concludes by offering a strategy for disrupting ineffective and/or harmful communication practices.

HOW CAN WE BE BETTER COMMUNICATORS?

At VillageReach, our people are our greatest asset.

Every single one of us brings a constellation of unique experiences to each of our interactions. Our capacity to productively and meaningfully interact with one another is crucial for maximizing our collective impact. The successful transference of ideas requires an individual as well as an organizational investment in building trust and creating understanding. We are collectively committed to cultivating an environment in which we all actively combat the biases, invalidating experiences and exclusionary practices that may negatively impact our communication and, by extension, the work that we do. When we are empowered with strategies that promote skillful and clear communication, we are better positioned to tap into our diverse competencies in order to increase our capacity to collaborate, to ideate and to produce high-quality work.

One approach that can be applied to help us be better communicators is the **"Assess, Acknowledge and Adapt"**, or the **3A framework**[14] *(Figure 6)*. The 3A framework can help us achieve more constructive and productive collaborations. This is because the framework creates space for us to say "Communication mistakes happen – this is our approach for identifying them, addressing them and minimizing their impact."

Figure 6: The 3A Framework supports impactful collaborations

1 – ASSESS	2 – ACKNOWLEDGE	3 - ADAPT
❑ Mentally take a step back without judging or evaluating the situation. ❑ Put yourself in the shoes of the recipient of your verbal or nonverbal communication. ❑ Listen. Hear them out if they are able to state what they need from you to rectify the situation. ❑ Try to understand how your words and/or actions impacted them. Try to understand what motivates your words or actions.	❑ Think deeply about any preconceived notions that may motivate words and actions that threaten collaboration. ❑ Take ownership if you have invalidated or caused harm to someone. This is foundational for actually addressing instances of ineffective communication. ❑ Acknowledge when your colleagues model strong and impactful communication practices.	❑ After considering and taking ownership for the impact that your words or actions may have on others, you are better equipped to articulate opportunities for growth, development and improvement in future interactions. ❑ Speak up if a colleague uses disparaging communication practices. ❑ Model behaviors that contribute to a culture of collaboration. Challenge yourself to communicate in ways that promote a strong communication environment.

Addressing Internal Communication Challenges

HOW CAN WE BE BETTER COMMUNICATORS? (Continued)

Because we are collectively committed to achieving strong collaboration across our diverse teams, we must be proactive about identifying and understanding the ways in which we perpetuate bias. Taking the time to meaningfully reflect on our interactions with others is foundational for catalyzing meaningful change in our communication landscape. The 3A framework can—and should—be applied proactively to help us be more skillful communicators and to create a better, more effective communication culture.

To support a more communicative work culture, it is important for us to ASSESS the situation and think before we speak or act. Then, we must ACKNOWLEDGE if changes can be made to improve upon our communication approach in the future. We do this by recognizing when our words and actions negatively impact others. From there, we can ADAPT our behavior for more effective and meaningful collaborations.

Figure 7: The 3A Framework in Action

References & Resources

ABOUT VILLAGEREACH's DIVERSITY & INCLUSION GROUP

The Diversity & Inclusion Group or DIG is VillageReach's organizational initiative to assess, create and sustain diverse, inclusive and equitable organizational policies and practices.

Through DIG, VillageReach aims to transform its approach to engaging global staff, cultivating partnerships and developing innovations in a way that will maximize our collective impact to save lives and improve health in low- and middle-income countries

The Internal Communications Group within DIG works to foster a culture of collaboration and inclusivity within and across our global offices.

It is the long history of humankind that those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.

-Charles Darwin

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2. Inclusive Leadership: The View From Six Countries
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6. Effective Leadership is All About Communicating Effectively: Connecting Leadership and Communication
7. Unconscious Bias - UCSF
8. State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2015
9. Communication Skills – Don't be Invalidating
10. Understanding Implicit Bias
11. Intent vs Impact: How Do You Communicate
12. Being Treated as Invisible More Harmful than Harassment
13. Who's Being Left Out on Your Team
14. Adapted from "Teaching Strategies to Increase Nursing Student Acceptance and Management of Unconscious Bias."

Resources

You can find other resources vetted and curated by VillageReach's Personal Learning and Development Working Group within the Diversity and Inclusion Group on Dropbox:
PLD Working Group's Curated Articles & Resources