

South Pacific Regional Environment Programme

Training Unit J

COMMUNICATING KNOWLEDGE TO OTHERS

USE OF THIS UNIT

The participants in this training programme may well find it necessary to communicate what they have learned to others. This unit should be the basis for exercises helping them to learn how to communicate better. It covers three types of communication: verbal communication (giving a simple talk); written communication (writing a report); and teaching by example.

The only real way to learn to communicate is through practice. While the suggestions in this unit may be of some help, most of the time should be spent giving each participant the chance to practice communicating to the others in the group. This will help to give them more confidence in carrying out their work.

EXERCISES

Participants should be asked to prepare and present at least two short talks before the group, one of 5 minutes and one of 10 minutes, on topics either assigned by the group leader or chosen by the participant with the approval of the leader. Any comments made should be encouraging to build as much confidence as possible.

There should also be practice exercises in writing reports, with written comments provided by the group leader, or by exchanging the reports between members of the group. Report writing can also be included in the exercises for other units in the training programme.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

More information on this topic at a slightly more advanced level can be found in Managing Protected Areas in the South Pacific Region: A Training Manual by Rex Mossman. Department of Lands and Survey, Auckland. Draft May 1985. This or a revised version should be available through the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

TEXT

COMMUNICATING KNOWLEDGE TO OTHERS

Anyone who is working on problems of the environment and who is learning things through observations or experiments will need to communicate his or her knowledge to others. If information is not shared, then the members of the community cannot work together to manage their resources and environment.

It may be necessary to explain an observation to other resource users, to make suggestions to a meeting of the family or community, to present some results to the chiefs or council of elders, to explain a situation to an extension officer, or to make a report to a government department or interested scientist.

Part of becoming a local specialist on environmental management is thus learning how to communicate what you know. The three most important ways of communicating at the village level are:

- verbally, through talking to people or speaking to groups;
- in writing, through written reports, letters and notes; and
- by example, through demonstrating something in practice so that others can see for themselves what happens or how a new technique or practice works.

For all kinds of communication, there are certain basic principles that must be observed. You cannot communicate clearly if your own thinking is not clear. Muddled communications are usually a sign of muddled thinking. Be sure you have thought things through carefully, so that they are clear in your own mind, before you try to share them with others. Sometimes discussing the subject with someone you know well can help you to clear your thoughts. Your friend may raise questions or spot flaws in your reasoning that can help you to present your ideas better.

Communication always requires some organization. For example, you will need to introduce the subject in some way to create an interest in going further. You may then want to explain how you got your information or what methods you used, before going on to your results. At the end you may have some discussion, conclusions or recommendations. Obviously different topics will need to be presented differently, but there should be some logical organization. If you skip back and forth from one idea or aspect to another, you will only produce confusion.

The following are some suggestions to make your communications easier and more effective. While they are grouped by the type of communication, many of the ideas apply to some extent to all ways of communicating knowledge.

GIVING A SIMPLE TALK

Speaking in front of other people is a habit or skill that needs to be learned just like any other. It is really very easy. Most problems come because we feel embarrassed standing in front of an audience, or because in some cultures it is not correct for young people to speak in front of their elders or for women to speak in front of men.

Embarrassment comes from thinking of ourselves instead of the ideas we want to communicate to the audience. It usually passes with a little bit of practice.

Cultural barriers may be more difficult to overcome, but modern life requires more communication between people. Today young people have learned things their elders never had a chance to learn, and women are increasingly recognized as an important factor in society. More people are therefore ready to forget old customs and to listen to ideas or knowledge from whatever source. Traditional respect can be expressed in words and gestures rather than through silence. Consultation between all parts of the community is necessary for a health future. This is particularly true of environmental management, where everyone has a role to play in the proper use of resources. It may seem very hard to take the first step in a new direction, but again, with practice, the old cultural limits will change.

The key to effective speaking is **knowing your subject**. This knowledge will give you the confidence you need to speak. Remember that your aim is to share your knowledge or information with the audience, to persuade them to some course of action, and/or to inspire or motivate them to think or behave differently.

Preparing a speech

When preparing a speech, it can help to divide it into parts and then to consider each part carefully. You first need to know what topic you are going to talk on. Then think about it for a few days, research the subject and ask questions.

The main parts of a speech are:

- the opening,
- creating interest,
- creating confidence,
- the body of the speech,
- the closing.

Think through or write down the main facts for each part, then trim them and keep only the most important. It may help to think of a good opening sentence for each part. To develop the facts or points, you may want to use: statistics, evidence, observations, historical facts, anecdotes, humorous stories, analogies, quotations, traditional proverbs, legends, local colour, experimental results or observations.

The **opening** should be low key but without apologies. You may want to start with a bit of humour if it is appropriate, or perhaps a question. Some history or facts also make good openings.

Interest can be created through sharing what interests you, through exhibiting or showing an object, picture or map, or by getting the listeners to answer yes or no to a question.

You then need to show why the listeners should have **confidence** in what you have to say if they do not already know you. You might briefly describe your experience, your sources or the depth of your knowledge (without getting big headed). Try to answer the question they will be asking themselves: "Why do you know what you are talking about?"

For the **body of the speech**, you should divide your main theme into several points or steps, and then treat each point as a speech in itself with an opening, a middle, and an end which leads into the next point. Remember that you must tell your audience something. This could either be what you want to tell them, or what they will be interested to hear.

For the **closing** do not say too soon that you are coming to the end. Try a surprise, a summary of your main point, a question, a quote or a story, or ask for action or appeal for help.

Speech formats

Your speech can be prepared in three different ways.

Some people prefer to **write out** the speech before hand and then to read it in front of the audience. It can be reassuring to have the text in front of you and to know exactly what you are going to say, but a speech that is read out can have several disadvantages:

- written language is not always the same as spoken language, and a text that seems fine on paper may sound unnatural when it is spoken,
- it is more difficult to vary your voice and to make a read text sound interesting,
- you cannot easily make last minute changes to your text or respond to audience reactions or comments.

The same kinds of limitations apply to a speech that is written out and then memorized.

Another kind of speech is the **impromptu** one, in which you speak without detailed preparation or any written notes. Some people have a talent for giving excellent impromptu talks, but if you are not very experienced and well organized, it is easy to mix things up or to forget important points all together, and thus to fail to communicate what you wanted. The impromptu format is better for inspiring people than for communicating information.

The third format and often the most effective is to prepare the speech and then to speak from **outline notes**. The notes will remind you of what you want to say and in what order you want to present the points, while leaving you free to adjust and improvise the actual presentation, and to make it more living and enthusiastic. Notes can also help to give you confidence, because if you suddenly forget what you were going to say next, you can refer to your notes for the next point. It always helps to practice a talk before you give it.

It may be best to make your notes on cards of moderate size (say 100 by 150 mm or 4" x 6") since cards are easier to change in the middle of a speech than sheets of paper. The cards should be numbered so you can keep them in order, and could include your main opening sentences, and an outline of any special points you want to make, and reference to any aids or exhibits you are using to support your talk.

Visual aids and exhibits can help to stimulate interest and to communicate information that is not easy to describe verbally. These can include:

- charts or diagrams (like the rainfall bar graph shown in unit H2);
- maps;
- photographs;
- colour slides projected on a screen;
- films;
- drawings, key words or sentences which you write on a blackboard;
- diagrams, figures or written points shown with an overhead projector;
- objects of interest like soil samples, shells, or diseased leaves; and
- short experiments or demonstrations done in front of the audience.

Visual aids do not have to be complicated (you can even write with charcoal on a white bedsheet. What is most important is that they be large enough that everyone in the audience can see them. A good test is to try reading your own handwriting on the blackboard (or other surface) from the back of the room. If you use slides, be sure to rehearse them before the actual talk, so that you know that they are the right side up and in the proper order.

A few well-prepared visual aids are better than a jumble of poor or confusing ones. For some talks a series of visual aids like charts or slides can take the place of part of your notes in reminding you what to say or explain. Passing exhibits around is not such a good idea, as it distracts the listeners from the rest of your talk.

Suggestions for good speaking

1. You will gain confidence through your knowledge. Be sure you are well prepared.
2. Don't be nervous. Teach yourself to relax.
3. Be yourself, be human and natural.
4. Be enthusiastic.
5. Try to avoid mannerisms or frequently repeated gestures or phrases (you see, a...a...a, you know, etc.).
6. Don't hurry.
7. Be punctual. Start on time and keep to your allotted time.
8. Dress neatly and correctly. Your appearance should not detract from your message.
9. Speak clearly, and vary your voice.
10. Use simple words and avoid slang.
11. Speak to the back of the room and maintain eye contact with the whole group.
12. Watch for distress signals (yawning, dozing, restlessness) and loss of interest that may show you have spoken too long.
13. Know your audience: their interests, make up, level of knowledge, age, or other factors that can help you adapt your talk to their level and interests.

The essential points to remember when giving a simple talk are to:

know your subject;
think it out;
prepare it thoroughly;
relax, be yourself; and
take the opportunity to practice, practice, practice.

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

It is not always possible to convince people to take action or to change their behavior simply by talking to them, particularly when the changes involve habits or practices that have been continued for generations. Rural people are understandably conservative. They prefer ways that are familiar and have been proven over time to taking risks with new and unproven techniques. In the past failure could mean death by starvation, and even today it can bring economic or social disaster in spite of programmes of emergency assistance.

If through your work on environmental management you have found new ways to develop or protect resources, the most convincing way to communicate them to others is by showing them in practice. This could mean organizing demonstrations or pilot projects where people can come to see for themselves how the changes work.

You may have the possibility of making a demonstration on your own land or in your own fishing area. This is always the easiest because you yourself can control it. Many small improvements like erosion control, improved soil management, new agricultural techniques, small scale reforestation, small protected areas and fishing reserves can be taught in this way.

Where you do not have the resources to make the demonstration yourself, you will need to persuade the family or village to try out the new management method or development technique on a small scale on some part of the resources they control. There can even be an experimental and a control area, with the new technique tried in one, and the old way continued in the other comparable area so that everyone can see what the difference is.

At the end of the time necessary for the results to be seen, you can invite everyone to visit the demonstration, after which it may be easier to explain just what was done and why it is an improvement.

Do not be afraid of open consultation about a project or trial. Even a sceptical critic of the project may make comments or suggestions which can help to improve it. The goal should be the success of environmental management and development in the community, and not to prove whether any individual was right or wrong.

WRITING REPORTS

Communicating verbally or by example is only useful for those who can be there at a particular time and place. If it is necessary to communicate information to those who are farther away, or to leave records for those who may come after you, or even to remind yourself of what you did in previous years, then written records or reports will be essential.

The form and content of written records has already been described in unit H3 - Recording and Analyzing Data. At some point, however, you may need to make a report summarizing what you have done, perhaps to send to a government department, to an interested scientist or to the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, or in support of a request for the financing of a development project based on your work. You may want to circulate a report of what you have done to other parts of the country so that others can benefit from your experience.

Preparing a report will take time and effort, which you might think would be better spent on more practical things. The importance of a report is that it puts your work in more permanent form where it can be useful over a larger area and for a longer time, so it is almost always worth the effort.

Report format

Most scientific reports have the following format:

- An **introduction** gives a brief background on the report and explains what the problem was and what previous work may have been done on the subject.
- A section on **materials** and **methods** gives details as to how the work was done, so that anyone who wants to repeat your work will know how to do it.
- The major part of the report gives the **results** that are being reported on in as much detail as necessary.
- You may then want a section of **discussion** in which you tell why the results are important, and perhaps suggest further kinds of work that are needed to follow up on the report.
- In **conclusion** you may summarize what you accomplished and perhaps make some recommendations for action.
- If you have referred to any books, papers or other reports, then you should list the **references** at the end of the report.
- The report may include **figures** such as photographs, drawings and maps, and **tables** which may list detailed measurements or other information in support of the written text.

- Sometimes, to keep the main report short and easy to read, some detailed sections, data or exhibits can be put in one or more **annexes** at the end of the report where they can be referred to if needed.

You do not have to include all these parts in your reports, but you may find that you will need them in some reports.

If your report is less a scientific report for the record than a submission to decision makers, then you will not want to include so much detail. Such a report might start with a **summary** giving the main points for those who may not even have the time to read the whole report (like many ministers). You would then give a brief description of the **problem**, followed by the major **results** on which a decision should be based. The **consequences** of the different courses of action (if there are any) could be mentioned, followed by **recommendations** as to the appropriate decision or action.

Suggestions for effective reports

1. **Know your intended audience.** You should adapt your style and content to the interests and concerns of your expected readers.
2. **Keep it short and simple.** A report is intended to communicate ideas, facts, and opinions. It need not be a literary masterpiece.
3. **Work from an outline.** Think through the content of the report and make a list or outline of what you want to say before you start writing.
4. **Get attention quickly.** Avoid background material that is already well known. State the report's purpose in a few words, and then come to grips with the facts.
5. **Make it objective.** People are seldom interested in what we think, and would rather read what we know. A report is not the place to try to make an impression. Keep it restrained and avoid extravagant statements.
6. **Break it up.** Use short paragraphs of a few lines. List facts in 1-2-3 order, set off with headings. Indent or underline important points. Provide key paragraphs so that the reader will know what it is all about. Make sure important points are clearly stated.
7. **Use a clear, open lay-out.** A good report invites reading. Don't crowd a lot of words into a little space. Leave ample margins for making notes.
8. **Button it up.** Conclude the report with a brief summary of its points, and if desirable offer recommendations. If they are rejected do not be too upset; decision-makers may have other priorities or information not available to you. The important thing is to communicate your knowledge.