Bite Sized Learning Session 1: Top tips for simplifying complex information

A key part of what we do, as employees or volunteers for voluntary, community or social enterprise (VCSE) organisations, is to make sense of complex information, simplify and present to the people who use our services.

This briefing including the notes which accompanied the presentation delivered during the live event on the 9th January 2021 as well as the additional points and suggestions from the question and answer session.

Understanding complex information in documents or meetings

Documents

1. Use a highlighter, to pick out the bits you think are important and the bits you don't understand
2. Ask the author, the distributor or other recipients about sections you don't understand in meetings

In the meeting

1. Read all documents in advance
2. If new to the meeting speak to the chair in advance and ask if they can remind attendees to use jargon free language
3. ASK if you don't understand something (the chances are that others won't either)

Engaging your 'internal translator'

Firstly, ask yourself three questions;

1. Who is your audience?
2. What do you want them to understand from this information? (What is that "one thing" I want my audience or listeners to remember about my presentation?)
3. What do you want them to do with the information? (Why should they be concerned about this 'one thing'?)

The goal here is to make an impact

Decide how to communicate

You know your audience; you know how important this information is. Should it be presented:

*   In a meeting (face to face or zoom)
*   In a document
*   Perhaps a film clip

Staged Process

1. **Compile relevant information** - Gather the information you need to share, leaving out anything that isn't essential. It can be tempting to share every detail. But it's important to remember that your audience may not need (or want) to know all the nitty-gritty details. In fact, too much detail can muddle your message and overwhelm your audience.

2. **Break it down** - Once you've compiled all of your information, distil it down to its smallest parts. What are the main components of what you're sharing? Ask questions from the perspective of a layperson, and look for holes that could confuse a non-expert.
3. **Organise the information** - Assume your audience has no knowledge of your topic, so the organisation of the content should be based on clarity. Put yourself in the reader's shoes and pretend you're new to this topic, or think back to when you first learned about it, and organise it to best help comprehension.
4. **Use clear language** - Using clear language is the most significant thing you can do to help others. Avoid jargon, industry terminology and "insider" phrasing. Replace big words with shorter, simpler words. Use short sentences. In addition to clear language, use stories and examples that your audience is already familiar with.
5. **Use formatting** - While you don't want to over-format and clutter things up with too many graphics, fonts or colours, you do want to use formatting that enhances clarity. Here are a few ways you can achieve this: Incorporate headings that follow a logical structure. Present information in brief numbered or bulleted lists. Use different fonts and colours to highlight, emphasize and differentiate pieces of information. Insert clear visuals (such as images, maps, graphs or tables) that supplement your written information, illustrate difficult concepts or present supporting facts and data.
6. **Get feedback** - Ask the opinion of others who have no familiarity with the subject. Do they find it easy to follow and understand? Do they come away feeling as though they've learned something?

Structure of written or in person presentation

1. Explain why you are presenting this information and what you want people to do with it
2. Give the information and summarise
3. Repeat your question to the audience
4. Encourage questions and discussion

Useful Resources

- Plain English Campaign www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html

- Using picture to explain oxleas.nhs.uk/site-media/cms-downloads/EASYINFOpictureguide.pdf

- https://readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php

- http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/the-a-z-of-alternative-words.html

Other points raised in the Question and Answer Session

- It is easier when translating, if a document is in plain English
- VCSE sector has its own jargon
- We should ask public sector colleagues to present information in an easier to understand format.
- There is no direct translation for some words – Using stories, pictures, examples and cartoons can help with this
- Silent drama is useful (think of the international appeal of Mr. Bean)
- Hand gestures, facial expressions and body language can be useful
- Acknowledging that we don't always have time to simplify everything, we can at least commit to highlighting one main point for the reader when sending out complex information
- Many of our customers aren't aware that they have a learning need, as it is undiagnosed. They just think that they had a poor school experience.
- Be brave in saying I don't understand.