



About the Print Version

This print version of the module includes all the substantive content from each screen, except for the directions for the interactive graphics. It does not include the Check Your Understanding exercises and the final quiz. The toolkit, which is referenced throughout the module, is available online.

Introduction to Effective Communication

Meet DeBoma County's Frontline Environmental Public Health Practitioners

Susan Lee, director of Environmental Health in the DeBoma County Health Department, is concerned about a number of communication issues that have recently surfaced in her unit. Local citizens are complaining that the department failed to address the possible contamination of a nearby water source. Several restaurant owners have failed to correct reoccurring code violations that were noted on their inspections reports. And on top of that, a recent editorial in a local town newspaper has accused the department of doing nothing about the threat of West Nile virus.



Challenges of Communicating Environmental Health

When discussing these issues with her three environmental health program supervisors, all react similarly. Omar remarks, "We've told people time and again not to use pesticides near our local water sources, but they just don't listen."

Joe chimes in, "The restaurant owners and managers often don't pay attention to me when I tell them what they need to do."

Virginia adds, "We've got programs in place to protect against West Nile virus and other diseases, but no one seems to know about them. The other day I heard a woman express concern that she wouldn't know what to do in an outbreak."

Audio clip: I saw a magazine article about West Nile virus. That's so scary. It makes me think about other diseases like bird flu. I wonder about all that, you know. I probably shouldn't worry, but I have no idea what would happen if there was an outbreak. Is the community ready? What can I do to protect my family?

Susan looks at her staff with understanding. "Maybe we should turn this into an opportunity to improve our communication skills."

Why Is Effective Communication Important?



Susan knows that the environment can have a direct effect on human health. She and her staff work at the intersection of health and the environment every day. If the public doesn't know how she and her staff are identifying and dealing with environmental issues, then much of the important work they're doing may be wasted. She realizes that a central part of her staff's job is to describe the purpose and practice of environmental health to the public.

She also considers the fact that she and her staff are responsible for communicating with people about risks and ways to prevent illness and injury. If they have weak communication skills, the environmental health division may not be doing a very good job of fulfilling its responsibility to the community.

Susan wonders what her staff needs to know about how to communicate effectively. She thinks, "I took some classes on communication and conflict resolution, and I know some people who could help. My experience in the field could be useful. I'm going to put together some practical information that my staff and I can use in our daily work."

Why Does Effective Communication Matter to You?

In your frontline role as an environmental health specialist, you have the responsibility to communicate with the public on a variety of environmental health issues. Although regulation and enforcement remain important tools, good communication skills are a key part of the solution to many environmental health problems. You must be able to explain clearly the reasons why practices, recommendations, and regulations are so important.

Think about your current job responsibilities. Regardless of what kind of environmental health work you do, during a typical day you probably have to spend a lot of your time communicating with clients. Examples may include educating a food worker during an inspection, providing e-mail advice to a solid waste hauler about licensing requirements, or listening to a complaint from a homeowner about a water quality problem.

Think of three work situations where communication is important in accomplishing your job. See sidebar for sample answer.

Communication Is a Process

Susan calls Jane, the health educator for the health department, to ask her for some advice.

"Hi Jane. Recently, my staff and I have become frustrated about problems we have when we try to explain our regulations and suggestions to clients and the public. People don't seem to be getting our messages. They don't change their behavior, and they don't grasp the value of what we do. I want to help my staff communicate better, but I'm not sure where to start."

"How about starting with an overview of the communication process?" Jane

Risk communication is important for environmental public health professionals. The toolkit directs you to more detailed information and to a separate module about risk communication.

Sample answer: Situations in which environmental health workers use communication skills include:

- Training food service personnel to prevent food-borne illness
- Answering e-mails, letters, or phone calls from concerned residents
- Going over inspection reports with clients
- Talking to clients about their water wells or septic systems
- Educating people about preventing disease and accidents
- Communicating with peers

responds. “One of the most important things to emphasize to your staff is that the purpose of communication is to get your message across to others. That seems obvious, **but just stating the facts doesn’t necessarily communicate your message. The communication process isn’t a one-way process.** It involves both the sender of a message (the talker) and the receiver (the listener). And that means there’s room for error to happen. Messages can get misinterpreted along the way.

See the toolkit for more information about the communication process.



“Communication between people can be challenging, Susan. When you talk about the communication process, make sure to spend some time thinking about all the barriers that can get in the way of good communication.”

“Thanks, Jane. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

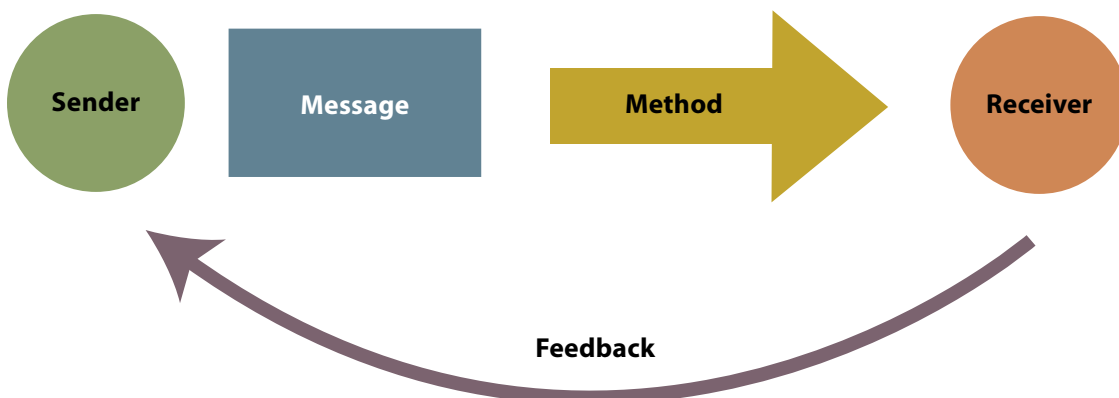
Communication is effective when the intended message of the sender and the listener’s interpreted meaning are the same.

Parts of the Communication Process

At the weekly staff meeting Susan lays out her plan to the staff to get their support.

“After talking with many of you about our client complaints, I’ve put together a mini-workshop on communication skills that can help us do our jobs better. At each of the next few staff meetings, we’ll explore different communication topics. Today, we’ll discuss the five parts of the communication process.”

- the sender
- the receiver
- the message
- the method
- the feedback



Parts of the Communication Process (continued)

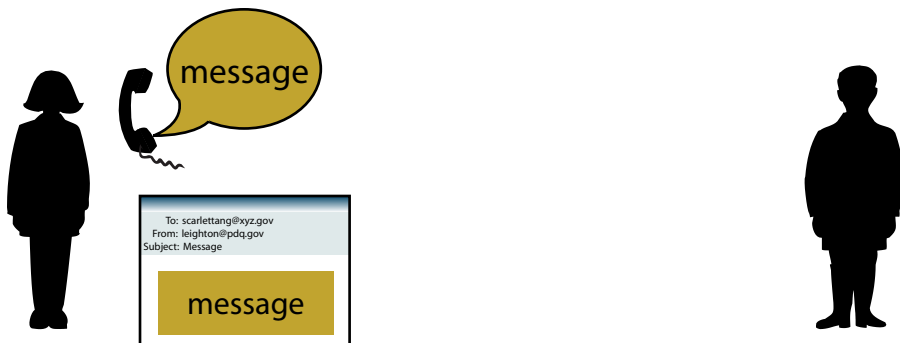
The Sender: In her job, Virginia is responsible for communicating ideas, information, and regulations to others. As a *sender*, she may want to inform, educate, empower, persuade, or influence others to think about their health, their actions, and how their actions influence the health of their community.

The Receiver: The *receiver* is the sender's intended audience. *Receivers* have thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that influence how they hear and understand the message and how they will respond.

The Message: The *sender* communicates information—the message—to a *receiver*. As environmental public health workers, we often have important messages that we want to convey to individuals or the public.

The Method: The *sender* chooses methods or channels to communicate the message. These include face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, online teleconferences, PowerPoint presentations, and written communication such as letters, e-mails, memos, or reports.

The Feedback: As a *sender* communicates a message, the *receiver* responds with feedback, either through words or through body language. This feedback is how senders know if their audience understands the message.



Identify Barriers to Communication

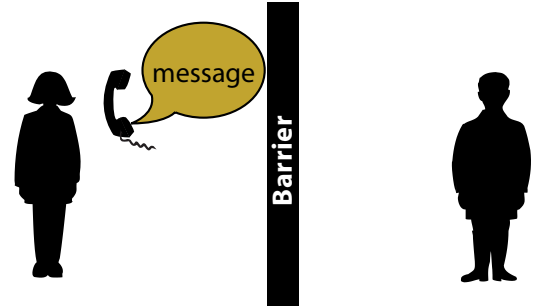
Barriers to effective communication can block the message at every stage in the process. **Senders are responsible for breaking down any barriers and removing obstacles that exist between them and the receivers.** Possible barriers include:

- Language and cultural differences between the sender and receiver. *Such as when English is not someone's first language.*
- Distracting surroundings. *Noise, interruptions, uncomfortable space.*
- Ineffective methods. *Calling while distracted, using e-mail for a sensitive topic.*
- Unclear messages. *Using jargon, complicated or disorganized messages.*
- Misleading nonverbal communication. *Eye contact, posture, rushing.*

- Not paying attention. *Not listening, playing with a cell phone while listening, interrupting, not giving feedback.*
- Assumptions. *Assuming you already know the message without listening, filtering out the parts of the message that match preconceived notions and then ignoring the rest.*

If the *message* the sender is trying to deliver is too long or is disorganized or contains errors, the receiver may misunderstand the message.

If the receiver is confused and does not give *feedback*, and the sender continues to talk without checking for and clarifying any misunderstandings, the barriers will stand, and the sender will not successfully communicate the *message*.



Identify Barriers in Practice

Joe is conducting a food service inspection at a new restaurant in town. He arrives at the restaurant to find a busload of high school football players ordering their food. The staff is hustling to serve the large crowd.

Joe inspects the kitchen and finds a number of temperature violations. He and the restaurant manager move to the side of the loud, busy kitchen so Joe can discuss his findings with the manager. The manager is able to understand English but only if he is spoken to slowly and carefully. Joe doesn't want to take up too much of the manager's time so he hurries through the discussion of the findings, and doesn't explain what the manager needs to do next.

Joe hands the manager the inspection report, thanks him for his time, and says he'll return in a week or so to check on the needed corrective actions. The manager, looking confused, nods, and thanks him.



Audio clip: Mr. Wong, I can see you're busy here, and the problems we've just discussed are on your inspection sheet. Here you go. So I'll be back in about a week to see if the critical violations have been taken care of. And... I especially want you to take care of that temperature control problem on..., I think it was your steam table. It's happened once too often. Well I'm busy, so I'll get out of your hair. Have a nice day.

Consider barriers in this scenario that could make it difficult for Joe to successfully communicate his environmental health message to the manager. See sidebar for sample answer.

See the toolkit for more information about the communication process.

Sample answer: Some of the barriers present as Joe talks with the restaurant manager:

- Distracting surroundings
- Crowd of customers
- Loud, busy kitchen
- Busy front and back staff
- English as a second language
- Lack of space to conduct a discussion

Core Competencies of Environmental Public Health

During the next staff meeting, Joe tells the rest of the staff that after his last inspection he realized there were some communication barriers in his conversation with the restaurant manager. He knew he had made mistakes and had

begun to consider ways he could remove the communication barriers the next time he was in a similar circumstance.

Joe can't help but feel, though, that there must be some ways to help make sure the communication process is successful. He asks the group, "Aren't there some specific skills we could learn to help us with this?"

Susan tells her team that the [National Center for Environmental Health in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Corecomp/CoreCompetencies_EH_Practice.pdf) and the [American Public Health Association](http://www.apha.org/programs/standards/health-compproject/corenontech-nicalcompetencies.htm) collaborated on identifying 14 Core Competencies that all Environmental Public Health practitioners should have. Four of those are specifically for communication. "And," she says, "Jane, our department's health educator, and I have discussed a plan to go over a few skills from each of those four communication competencies. She's joining us for today's meeting. Jane, can you help us to understand these competencies and our plan?"

http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Corecomp/CoreCompetencies_EH_Practice.pdf

<http://www.apha.org/programs/standards/health-compproject/corenontech-nicalcompetencies.htm>

Four Communication Competencies

Jane introduces herself and says "What we're really talking about are applied skills and knowledge that enable you to perform your work. I've put the four communication competencies on the board. Looking at them, you can probably think of several ways that you use these competencies every day on the job."

See the toolkit for more information about competencies.

Educate: The capacity to use the environmental health practitioner's frontline role to effectively educate the public on environmental health issues and the public health rationale for recommendations.

Communicate: The capacity to effectively communicate risk and exchange information with colleagues, other practitioners, clients, policy makers, interest groups, media, and the public through public speaking, print and electronic media, and interpersonal relations.

Conflict Resolution: The capacity to facilitate resolution of conflicts within the agency, in the community, and with regulated parties.

Marketing: The capacity to articulate basic concepts of environmental health and public health and convey an understanding of their value and importance to clients and the public.

Key Effective Communication Skills

"Joe," Jane asks, "when working with the public on food safety issues, what is one way that you try to educate people?"

“Well, we set up a booth at outdoor community fairs so that people can come up and ask us questions,” replies Joe.

Jane nods enthusiastically. “Great. Using popular gathering places like community fairs to attract attention to an environmental health issue such as food safety is a good example of one of the skills we’ll work on—using teachable moments as opportunities to educate people. I’m going to support Susan as she works with you on specific skills from each of these competencies. Here’s what we’re thinking.”

From the **educate** competency we’ll work on:

- Asking open-ended questions
- Emphasizing prevention
- Finding teachable moments as opportunities to educate

From the **communicate** competency we’ll work on:

- Providing simple, accurate information
- Knowing your audience
- Avoiding jargon
- Being culturally competent when communicating

From the **conflict Resolution** competency we’ll work on:

- How to recognize when conflict resolution is or isn’t possible
- Strategies to manage conflicts

From the **marketing** competency we’ll work on:

- Emphasizing the value of environmental public health
- Tips for marketing environmental public health



Educate

At the next staff meeting, Susan says to the group, “We’re starting out with the competency that deals with educating our clients. We have opportunities to educate clients in practically every interaction. First, we’ll focus on asking open-ended questions, which is a great technique to get information from people in a way that helps you educate them.

“Remember, for the educate competency we’ll talk about asking open-ended questions, emphasizing prevention, and finding teachable moments, or in other words, opportunities to educate.”

Open-Ended Questions Create Opportunities to Educate

Susan begins by saying, “A close-ended question is one that people can answer with a brief, single-word response such as *yes* or *no*, or *Thursday*. Short responses give you little information and just two choices. You can ask further questions to draw out more information, or you can just begin educating your client without really knowing what kind of information they need.

Educate: The capacity to use the environmental health practitioner’s frontline role to effectively educate the public on environmental health issues and the public health rationale for recommendations.

“An open-ended question, however, allows the client to tell you what they know, what they think, and what information they need you to tell them. An open-ended question is difficult to answer with a brief response. Open-ended questions encourage a person to respond more fully, which helps you gather information.”

Let’s say that Virginia is discussing West Nile virus prevention measures with a client. First she asks a close-ended question and then an open-ended question. Notice how the client’s responses differ.



Narrator: Virginia asks a close-ended question.

Have you taken any steps to prevent West Nile?



Mmm...No.

The response the client gives to a close-ended question makes it difficult for Virginia to learn what her client needs to know. Now listen to how the response changes with an open-ended question.



Narrator: Virginia asks an open-ended question.

What steps have you taken to reduce your risk of getting the West Nile virus?



None, and I don’t really know what to do. I think it’s related to mosquitoes, but I’m not sure about that.

You’re right, some mosquitoes carry West Nile virus. If those mosquitoes bite you, they can give you the virus. So to protect yourself, you should prevent mosquito bites...

“The second question invites the client to answer her with specific examples of what she has or hasn’t done,” explains Susan. “This gives Virginia the option

to provide encouragement for any steps the client has taken or to ask more questions to find out why the client hasn't taken certain steps.

"Asking open-ended questions can be especially important in cross-cultural communication. They can alert you to language difficulties or misunderstandings. People's response to an open-ended question can reveal information about them and their cultural beliefs. Open-ended questions are also a great way to check that a person understands your explanations.

"Next we'll go through few examples to practice open-ended questions."

Use Open-Ended Questions

Here are some examples of how you can change a close-ended question to an open-ended question. The topic is the same in both questions, but the responses likely will be very different. Notice that many open-ended questions may not be questions at all, but rather statements that are requests for information.

Closed-ended question	Open-ended question
How many children do you have?	▶ Tell me about your family.
When do you plan to get a new refrigerator?	▶ So what is your plan for getting a new refrigerator?
Do you have a good relationship with your employees?	▶ Tell me about your relationship with your employees.
Do you like to smoke?	▶ What are some things you like about smoking?
Dusk and dawn are good times to use mosquito repellent, right?	▶ When are some times during the day when mosquito repellent is important to use?
Do you agree that it's a good idea to have your employees receive training in communication skills?	▶ What do you think about having all the employees receive training in communication skills?

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Here are examples of some useful ways to start open-ended questions.

- Would you tell me more about ____?
- What makes you resist ____?
- What have you tried before?
- How can I help?
- What do you plan to do next?



- Could you help me understand ____?
- What do you think you would lose if you no longer ____?

Asking your clients open-ended questions will likely provide you with useful information and help you to better educate your clients. And remember, if you ask open-ended questions, you need to be ready and willing to listen to the responses.

See the toolkit for more information about open-ended questions.

Emphasize Prevention

“Emphasizing prevention is another important part of educating our clients,” Susan says in the staff meeting the following week. “You all know how much of our frontline work involves emphasizing tasks that prevent harm or illness, such as washing hands, wearing gloves, using pesticides properly, and keeping foods at proper temperatures. But we need to think about *how* we communicate this information. Are we *teaching* others about the value of prevention, or are we just *telling* them to do an activity without explaining why it is important?”

“But education takes so much time,” sighs Joe. “Plus, we can usually just make people do things by enforcing the regulations. You know, like by suspending their permit to operate.”

Susan replies, “You’re right. It does take time to educate our clients, but educating them now may save a lot of time later. We can **use the power of prevention** to influence our clients. For example, we can teach our restaurant managers the importance of *preventing* an illness outbreak in their establishment to protect their business reputation, save them legal or recovery expenses associated with an outbreak, and most importantly, ensure that people are and feel safe when they eat in their establishment.”

Omar nods. “I like the idea of emphasizing prevention methods as a way to reduce negative outcomes rather than just telling clients to do things because of regulations. Let’s talk more about how to do it.”



Prevention Messages

As you know, a major responsibility of the field of environmental public health is to protect the health of people by preventing disease and injury and promoting safe and healthy practices. We often ask our clients to comply with regulations, many of which they may not think are important. **Emphasizing how these regulations can *prevent* illness, injury, and expense can help us educate our clients and motivate them to comply.**

Here are a few brief examples of how to incorporate an educational prevention message into your compliance activities. The education messages are indicated in italics.

- Make sure to heat or cool foods properly to *significantly reduce the growth of germs that might cause people to become sick.*
- Use sterilized equipment for each customer at your tattoo parlor to

reduce your risk of transmitting diseases that are passed on through blood.

- Testing your water for lead is really important. *Young children and infants are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning.* To prevent kids from possibly being harmed, you can easily get your water tested by...
- Mosquitoes can transmit diseases such as West Nile virus, which can *make people extremely sick.* You can help prevent this by getting rid of standing water, which mosquitoes need to breed. Try putting away or covering any containers that fill with water when it rains.

When you instruct your clients about what they should do, tell them why it is important to prevent illness, injury, inconvenience, or expense, so they will be more likely to understand and follow your guidance.

Prevention in Practice



Joe, a food inspector, says to a restaurant manager, “By law, people handling food must wear gloves.” What could Joe say instead that would emphasize prevention and help persuade the manager to enforce glove wearing?

What do you think Joe should say instead? See sidebar for sample answer.

Joe could ask the manager what he or she knows about the purpose of wearing gloves. Joe could point out that wearing gloves helps reduce food-borne illness transmission, which in turn prevents people from getting sick and would help reduce staff absences from illness. He could add that it would give the restaurant a bad reputation if customers got sick after eating there.

Teachable Moments: Opportunities to Educate

“Another way to educate our clients in a meaningful way is through the use of teachable moments, Susan says to her staff. “A teachable moment is an opportunity when an individual is more receptive to education or suggestions to change behavior. That moment is when your client will most value your environmental health message. Can you think of any good examples or events that have made our clients more receptive to our messages?”

“On a national level, emergencies such as Hurricane Katrina have made people more aware of the importance of keeping clean drinking water and being prepared for emergencies,” Omar says. “Or local events such as an outbreak of a food-borne disease from a deli counter or someone getting sick from West Nile,” Virginia adds.

Joe cuts in, “Also important, I think, are the single moments that occur during our typical day. For example, the other day someone told me that he had seen a TV show where a kid got sick from swimming in a polluted lake. He wanted to know if that can really happen. That was a perfect teachable moment.”

Audio clip:

Neighbor, Alex: Hey Joe. How’s it going?

Joe: Great. What’s new?

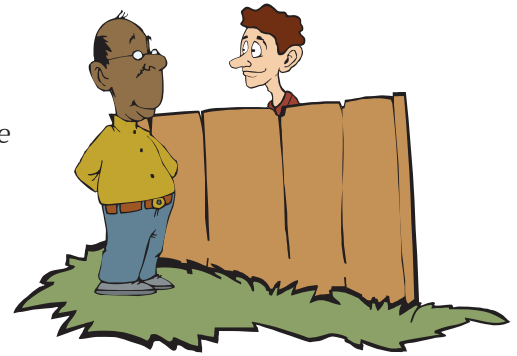
Alex: Nothing really. But I did see something on TV the other day that got me thinking. You know we have a pond behind our place. Well, on

TV there was a kid that got some kind of disease from swimming in a polluted lake. Do you think my kids could get sick from our pond?

Joe: Well, if your kids are swimming in it, it would be a good idea to get it tested in case it has high levels of germs or chemicals that could make your kids sick. I can give you the phone number for the people who will take a sample, test it, and tell you what's in the water.

"Exactly," says Susan. "If you are able to identify and use a teachable moment during your inspections, you have the chance to educate your clients in a way that is more natural and memorable."

Take advantage of your surroundings and current events to give context and importance to your environmental public health messages.



Teachable Moments in Practice

Consider each of the following examples of teachable moments. How might you take advantage of the opportunity? Examples are in italics.

A young girl gets treated for poisoning after playing with household cleaners. Distribute a flier to students at the girl's school reminding their parents how to identify, store, and dispose of hazardous chemicals.

A child almost drowns at a hotel outdoor swimming pool that has been inadequately fenced. Remind the pool manager about the regulations in the state pool code and the county pool ordinance. Offer to educate other pool owners about the need and rationale for appropriate fencing around pools.

The community comes together to donate money to pay for a low-income family to install a septic system. Talk to the local newspaper, so that along with a description of the event, the article reminds the community how often septic systems need to be pumped, how to schedule an inspection, and where to find information about septic systems.

The area state parks open for camping season. Send a letter to the owners and managers of the local recreational camping areas reminding them of the county ordinance and tips for maintaining safe and sanitary sites.

Communicate

Knowing that she has been throwing a lot of new knowledge and skills at her staff, Susan wants to check in with them to make sure they aren't feeling overwhelmed. During the next weekly staff meeting she asks, "How is all this new communication information working for you? Do you think it's helping you do your job better?"

"Yeah, it's been helpful," says Omar, "but I'm having trouble with something. I think a lot of the environmental health messages we're trying to get across are just too complicated—they're full of science, health, and technical language that can be confusing to people. The complicated words we have to use can be a huge barrier to effective communication."

Susan nods. “That’s an important point. The next skills we’ll work on relate to the communicate competency. We know that communication can happen in many different forms—in person-to-person discussions, letter and e-mail correspondence, telephone calls, site visits, group discussions, meetings, and even presentations. One thing that all of these types of communication have in common is that we have to make sure our complicated environmental health messages are accurate, while at the same time making them simple and easy to understand. Since you brought up how to simplify our messages, Omar, we’ll focus first on how to do just that.

“Before we are done with the communicate competency, we’ll discuss providing simple, accurate information, knowing your audience, avoiding jargon, and being culturally competent when communicating.”

Simplify Environmental Health Messages

Making the Complicated Simple...and Accurate

“Whether you are talking to someone in person or writing them a letter or e-mail,” Susan begins, “it’s important to use language that they will understand. Think about **who your audience is** and **what information they really need to know**. And try to **avoid environmental health jargon** as much as possible.”

“I know it helps to think through exactly what I want a client to do,” Omar adds. “Then I can be specific when I give them instructions. If I can break down the action into easy steps, that seems to make it easier for them to do something about it. Instead of just saying ‘Follow safety precautions to reduce food-borne disease transmission,’ for example, I would lay it all out in easy steps. I could say, ‘To avoid getting sick from food, follow these easy steps: 1. Wash fruits and vegetables before eating them. 2. Wash hands after handling raw meat. 3. Use a thermometer to be sure that food is properly cooked.’”

“Right,” says Susan. “We usually have a lot of information we’re trying to get across. Instead of emphasizing everything or being vague when we convey information, let’s try to **limit the number of messages to no more than three main ideas** at one time. Try to make messages that are concise, uncomplicated, and do not use jargon. Finally, it’s important not to sacrifice accuracy when you simplify a message.”

Breaking information into a few brief, simple messages will help people understand and remember what you are trying to communicate.

Communicate: The capacity to effectively communicate risk and exchange information with colleagues, other practitioners, clients, policy makers, interest groups, media, and the public through public speaking, print and electronic media, and interpersonal relationships.

See the toolkit for more information about simplifying communication.

Know Your Audience

The following week’s staff meeting arrives, and Susan is excited about the day’s communication topic. “Today we’re going to work on knowing your audience. Sometimes when we try to get important environmental health messages out to communities, I think we forget how diverse the public is. It doesn’t work for us to use the same message in every circumstance, because different people are likely to respond very differently to the same message.

“Knowing about the people who will be the audience for your message helps you to shape your message in a way that is most likely to gain their acceptance. Think about how age, gender, ethnic or cultural background, education, jobs, and life experiences could affect their response to you. Be aware of those factors, and consider how you might alter your message to meet your clients’ needs.”

Susan hands each person in the room a sheet of paper with the following list of points.

Before you start talking to a client, consider:

- **What do they already know?**

Don’t waste their time giving them unnecessary information. Focus on giving the additional information that will help them better understand and accept your message. **Don’t be shy about asking your clients how much they already know.** Asking shows your clients that you care about their interests and concerns.

- **Do they care?**

If your message is a low priority for them, you may have to build their interest first. If they are already interested, you can get to the point more quickly.

- **Acknowledge client attitudes and concerns.**

It helps to know what your audience thinks, feels, and believes about your message. If they feel positive about your message, you can focus mainly on reinforcing those views and the benefits your clients will receive. If you expect them to feel resistant, you’ll want to anticipate their objections and prepare your responses.

Learn about your audience, so you can show consideration for their knowledge and attitudes when you plan educational messages for them.

Know Your Audience In Practice

You are speaking before the county Chamber of Commerce about the state’s new public smoking ban. Your goals are to make sure they know what the ban says, how it applies to them, and how the health department will be supporting the ban in the community. How should you begin your interaction with them if you want to make sure you know the audience to whom you are speaking?

You begin by asking the Chamber of Commerce questions to find out what they already know about the smoking ban and what their attitudes about it are (Yes, if you want to make sure you know your audience, begin your interaction with the Chamber of Commerce by asking questions to learn what they know and how they feel). After that, you respectfully correct their misperceptions and give them the new information they do not already know. Before you leave, you want to make sure to give them the implementation plan you and the health department have laid out.

What would be an appropriate response in the following circumstance?

An owner of a few barber shops said, “We talked about the wording of the ban in the last meeting. We’re confused about the distance-from-entrance part



See the toolkit for more information about communicating with an audience.



and our responsibilities for enforcing it. We're also worried some of us will lose customers. This blasted ban has stirred things up."

How would you respond? See sidebar for the answers.

- A. "Well, let me tell you about what we at the health department have planned."
- B. "Let's go over what the ban says."
- C. "Let's clarify your responsibilities as business owners, and then we'll talk about how we can work together on this."
- D. "We're all really excited about how this will improve our community. I hope we can jointly release a statement commending the state on its decision."

- A. This is skipping ahead. From what they told you, you know you probably should address some of their concerns and clarify specific information about the ban before you get to your plan.
- B. They have already told you that they know what the ban says. You can respond to their concerns and clarify specific points.
- C. This sentence responds to what they want to know. It acknowledges their needs and does not disrespect their opinion of the ban. It opens the topic for further discussion.
- D. This sentence does not acknowledge the chamber's attitudes about the ban. You would want to address their concerns directly and not assume that they will agree with you.

Avoid Environmental Health Jargon

"I am so frustrated!" Virginia burst out to Joe while they ate lunch together later that week. "Mr. Larson down at the Parks department called me again to ask about West Nile virus prevention! I've already told him that DOH has been following CDC protocol, and that we are conducting mosquito control activities that utilize our epidemiologic capacity to conduct surveillance of mosquito-borne diseases in the human population, and monitor disease and the distribution of relevant animal and insect populations!"

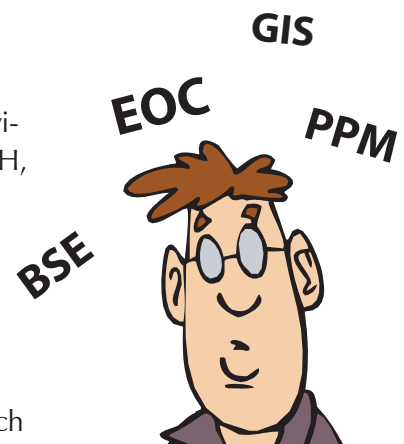
Audio clip: The DOH has followed CDC protocol. We're conducting mosquito control activities that utilize our epidemiologic capacity to conduct surveillance of mosquito-borne diseases in the human population. We also monitor the distribution of relevant animal and insect populations.

"Wow," says Joe, "Virginia, I think you're forgetting that the general public doesn't speak the same environmental health language we do. Lots of what we're trying to do is completely mystifying to other people! Why didn't you just tell him that the health department currently has lots of programs in place to track diseases caused by mosquitoes, including West Nile?"

Audio clip: The health department currently has lots of programs in place to track diseases caused by mosquitoes, including West Nile virus.

"But, I said that." Virginia exclaims. "No," says Joe, "You said a bunch of environmental health jargon that Mr. Larson probably didn't understand—like DOH, CDC, epidemiologic, capacity, surveillance, mosquito-borne diseases, populations. There are simpler and easier ways to say all those terms and get your point across. Clients won't always tell you when they don't understand. If you want to avoid misunderstanding, you should avoid jargon. Sometimes we do have to use technical words—but we should be able to give easily understandable explanations for what they mean."

"You're right," sighed Virginia. "And we should probably avoid acronyms, such



as EPA, FDA, EOC, ICS, GIS, PPM, BSE, and CDC, too. There are so many of them in environmental health!”

Using concise, easily understood language, without jargon or acronyms, is essential for good communication.

Be Conscious of Culture

“Before we move on to the next competency, conflict resolution, let’s talk about one very important topic that we should incorporate into all our communication—cultural competence,” Susan begins. “Being culturally competent helps us build relationships and show our clients respect. Also, we need to be aware that if we are not culturally competent or sensitive, we are not going to be able to do our jobs effectively.

“First, what do you think I mean by ‘culture’?”

“I assume you’re referring to all the ethnic groups in town,” replies Joe. “It has been challenging to work with all the different restaurant workers.”

“People who aren’t new to the US can have different cultures,” adds Virginia.

“Part of my family is from Mexico originally; we’ve been in the US for generations. I think people’s culture can come from any aspect of their race or ethnicity.”

Susan responds. “Race and ethnicity aren’t all of it, either. Culture is complex, and includes all the many ways that people define themselves. Your culture involves your beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors. For example, I’m a mother, an environmental health worker, a church-attender, and of Korean descent. Each of these is an aspect of my culture. Our perceptions of the world are influenced by aspects such as these. We need to be aware of that when we’re talking to people. And it’s important that we be aware of our own cultural influences and biases, as well as our clients’ cultural influences.”

Cultural Competence

“What do you really mean when you say ‘cultural competence’?” Virginia asks.

“Essentially it’s **your ability to work and communicate with people whose culture differs from yours**,” Susan explains. “It involves the recognition that regardless of their culture, people usually want respect, understanding, and open-mindedness from each other. When we interact with other people, we should not only recognize the differences among us, but also respect those differences.

“Of course, it’s easy to say ‘respect other people’ but it isn’t always obvious how to do that or to realize that you aren’t being respectful. People often misinterpret each other.

“We can’t know everything about every culture, but we can **be aware of the potential for misunderstanding**. We can ask questions when we’re unsure, and we can learn about potential sources of communication problems for the cultural groups with whom we work.”



Audio clip lacking cultural competence:

Client: I don't understand this document. I don't know what you want me to do.

EH person: All the information you need is written right there. Just follow the instructions. Call the number if you have questions. OK?

Client: Well... OK.

EH person: Good. Those problems need to be fixed within six weeks or you lose your permit.

Audio clip using cultural competence:

Client: I don't understand this document. I don't know what you want me to do.

EH person: This is confusing for many people. I can help you. Please, tell me more about what you don't understand.

Client: Do I need to do everything on this form? What do you mean by this sentence? What will happen if I am not able to complete the improvements?

Tips for Cultural Competence

Some of these tips for practicing cultural competence will sound familiar. All of them will be helpful in cross-cultural communication. Practical tips are in italics.

Think cross culturally. Analyze situations with the cultural context mind. Remember that your clients' culture shapes their perceptions of issues. Don't make assumptions or generalizations about what people think or need. Let go of your stereotypes about other cultural groups. *(If you walk into a room to speak to a group and see all women, be careful of your assumptions. Do not, for example, assume that they are all mothers or that they don't want to know about the science behind what you are doing.)*

Listen and observe. Listening and paying attention will help you anticipate potential cultural barriers or identify existing ones. Watch your clients' body language. *(For example, watch for head nods, but be aware that body language differs across cultures. In some cultures nodding is a sign of respect for authority rather than agreement with what you are saying.)*

Communicate clearly. Speak and write clearly. Use plain language. Explain your own perceptions. Get help from an interpreter if you find language barriers to communicating your message. *(For example, especially when you talk to people for whom English is a second language, do not assume that they are uneducated. Use plain language and do not speak louder if they do not understand.)*

Engage the individual or group you are communicating with. Ask for their feedback and perceptions, recognize your differences, and together find common ground. *(For example, you can ask open-ended questions to get your client involved in the conversation. This also helps because some people will say "yes" when you ask if they understand or agree, even if they do not.)*

Target educational messages to specific people or groups. Check your educational messages with a person from the target culture to make sure the messages will be received successfully. *(For example, if you are creating an information pamphlet that will be distributed in a mostly-Hispanic neighborhood and you are not from that neighborhood, ask a person who is from that neighborhood to look at it and help you, so the messages in the pamphlet are more likely to be specific to the needs and experiences of the community.)*

We should be sensitive to diverse cultures in all our communication, so that we give all people the recognition, respect, understanding, and equal treatment they deserve.

Know Yourself: Assess Your Cultural Competence

Use the following questions to help you consider whether you are sensitive to people whose culture differs from your own.

Rate yourself for each question:

SA = Strongly Agree

A = Agree

N = Neutral

D = Disagree

SD = Strongly Disagree

- _____ I get frustrated communicating with people who speak limited English.
- _____ I am comfortable asking people to tell me about aspects of their culture with which I am unfamiliar.
- _____ I am uncomfortable when people I am speaking with don't make eye contact.
- _____ I look for people to repeat back what I have told them to make sure they understood rather than relying on a nod.
- _____ I would be offended if people were uncomfortable dealing with me because of my gender.
- _____ I do not assume that nonverbal cues like smiling, shrugging, or handshaking mean the same to other people as they do to me.

Consider your responses and reflect on what implications they may have for your cultural competence. For each comment, **ask yourself, “Does my answer indicate that I am understanding and respectful when presented with cultural differences?”** Consider types of cross-cultural interactions in which you find it difficult to be open, curious, respectful, or helpful and how your attitude or response may interfere with the effectiveness of your communication.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict Resolution: The capacity to help resolve conflicts within the agency, in the community, and with regulated and unregulated parties.

“At today’s staff meeting” Susan begins, “we’re going to dig into another tough

topic: conflict. Conflicts are a normal part of life, and as you all know, they're a typical part of our jobs. How we deal with conflicts can really affect how effective we are in our jobs.

"Conflict arises for a variety of reasons. Conflict may occur between two people because the communication process breaks down, for example, or because of cultural differences or because the outcomes you want are incompatible.

"Often when people resolve conflicts, one person ends up the winner, and the other loses. This may solve the problem for the moment, but it can lead to resentment and more conflict later on.

When you can handle conflicts so that both sides benefit in the end, it builds relationships and helps both sides accomplish their goals."

"Today we'll go over two broad topics: how to recognize when conflict resolution is or isn't possible and strategies to manage conflicts."



When Conflict Resolution Is Difficult

Susan continues, "Conflict resolution is most difficult when you lack authority or the ability to bargain over a certain issue, you, or the other person, have no room for flexibility or compromise, you have a personal tie to the individual with whom you are having the conflict, or you are not able to communicate with the other person because of language or cultural differences.

"Virginia, remember last month when someone you knew from the PTA was angry with you because she wanted you to get the health department to help pay for improvements we required for her septic system? Of course, you're not involved with the on-site sewage inspection program. But because you know the woman personally, and because you had little authority over the issue, it was difficult for you to resolve the conflict by yourself. It was good that Omar could step in and help."



Virginia, this thing with my septic system is ridiculous. And expensive! Don't you guys in the health department help pay for this stuff? What about the county? It's the county's fault that the public sewage system doesn't reach over here, isn't it? They should help out.



I'm sorry to hear about your septic system, Maria. I know it can be expensive. You know, I could give you Omar's phone number. He works with septic systems and knows much more about it than I do.

Ideally, both parties should walk away from the situation having gained at least some of their interests. If both sides can be open to hear each other's point of view, recognize the problem, recognize their roles in the problem, specify their interests, find common ground, and negotiate the dispute, they are most likely to be able to resolve the conflict productively.

If you lack authority, lack regulatory flexibility, experience a language barrier, have a personal relationship with the other person, or the other person is not willing or able to resolve the conflict, you may need help to reach resolution.

Strategies to Resolve Conflicts

Generally, when you find yourself in a conflict, try to remain calm, open-minded, and respectful of yourself and the other person. It also helps to keep your goals in mind.

To keep communication open and two-sided, practice these strategies for resolving a conflict.

Analyze the situation

1. Listen actively
2. Reconsider from different perspectives
3. Identify the core problem

Determine an approach

1. Find common ground
2. Recommend solutions

Negotiate resolution

1. Obtain resources
2. Agree on a plan

We'll discuss all of these strategies, but let's start with active listening.

Listen Actively to Avoid or Resolve Conflict

"Remember when we were discussing the communication process and all the ways that messages can get misinterpreted or misunderstood? Using something called active listening allows you to check for understanding. Sometimes it's called listening for meaning. It's a great way to engage others in conversation, build trust, and avoid or begin to work through conflicts.

"We spend a large part of our day listening to what others are saying," Susan says. "But we are all probably guilty of not always taking the time to understand the message being sent to us. Maybe we're busy, in a hurry, or just don't want to hear what the person has to say. In our line of work, we can't let this happen. People's health depends on us. If we use active listening with our clients, we can help make sure that our communication is effective.

"Active listening is a valuable skill in all conversations and for being culturally



sensitive, but it can be especially helpful for dealing with conflict. Let's discuss how you listen actively and how to use it to help resolve conflict."

Listen Actively and Confirm Understanding

Active listening involves listening, observing, interpreting, and confirming verbal and non-verbal clues that the person to whom you are speaking gives you.

When you listen actively to your clients, you can:



- Check that they understand you
- Try to understand their thoughts, emotions, and point of view
- Build a good working relationship
- Reduce the occurrence of conflict

Some active listening techniques include *repeating*, *paraphrasing*, and *reflecting the feeling* of what you heard the person say. Here are some examples:

- Repeating
- Paraphrasing
- Reflecting feeling

By repeating, paraphrasing, or reflecting feelings, you are showing your clients that you're listening to what they are saying and attempting to understand them. If you are wrong in your interpretation, your active listening gives clients the opportunity to clarify what they are trying to say. Active listening will allow you to avoid misunderstanding and will help you provide your clients with the best guidance.

Repeating: The listener repeats very closely what the speaker has said, substituting some words or phrases.

Paraphrasing: The listener makes a major restatement of what the speaker said, including the meaning behind it.

Reflecting feeling: The listener tries to describe the emotions the speaker is expressing. This is the deepest form of listening.

Use Active Listening

Susan hands out a sheet of paper to her staff. She explains, "These strategies can help you use active listening during your conversations with clients. Take a look and tell me what you think."



Active Listening Strategies

- 1. Stop talking.** This is most important. It is very difficult to listen and speak at the same time.
- 2. Remove barriers to effective conversations.** Move away from distractions, such as noise or other people, and give the speaker your full attention.
- 3. Show clients you want to hear them.** Focus your attention on

them and ask them for clarification when you don't understand. Use open-ended questions.

4. **Empathize with the speaker.** Try to understand where they are coming from and why they feel as they do.
5. **Be aware of your own emotions.** If you are starting to feel angry or frustrated, be extra careful to listen for the full meaning of the speaker's words. If you are angry or upset, you may miss what is being said to you.
6. **Confirm your understanding.** Repeat, paraphrase, or reflect the feelings of the speaker.

Here are some sample opening phrases that can help you confirm that you understand the other person:

- So you feel that...
- You're wondering if...
- I get the impression that...
- I'm not sure if I'm with you; do you mean...
- This is what I think I hear you saying...
- Let me see if I'm with you; you...
- You feel ____ because ____.
- ...is that the way you feel?

Active Listening in Practice

Consider this client's comments. He is irritated about a local regulation.

Audio clip: What do you mean, 'I can't burn my trash?' You guys have so many rules. You know, I bet my neighbor reported on me. He's always going out of his way to one-up me on my yard. So, yeah, I did burn a pile of yard waste and trash. People do it all the time around here. My parents always did it back home, too. Anyway, I had to, I had a big pile and there's no other easy way to get rid of it. I didn't realize it was against the rules. I have more to get rid of, too, and you're going to make it a pain. What difference does it make, anyway?

What is the client's main message? See sidebar for sample answer.

Active Listening: Possible Pitfalls

Using active listening with clients can be very helpful for avoiding misunderstanding and reducing conflict. To reduce the barriers to communication and the likelihood of conflict, try to listen without blaming, criticizing, warning, disagreeing, or ordering the client to do something.

Some dangers to **avoid** when using active listening include:

- Pretending to understand. *If you get lost, don't try to fake it. Instead, say*



Sample answer: The man and the rest of the neighborhood burn yard waste because they do not know another good way to remove waste from their yards. They may not be aware of the regulations and their importance. The man has secondary issues as well of which we should be aware.

something like, “Sorry, I missed that. Could you please repeat what you were saying?”

- *Reacting mechanically. Don’t use the same active listening phrases over and over. Constantly repeating a phrase such as “You feel that...” will make it meaningless and annoying.*
- *Over-reaching. Be careful not to exaggerate what the client said or give meanings that go beyond what the client has said.*
- *Under-reaching. If you repeatedly miss the feelings that speakers are trying to convey or make responses that understate them, the speakers will know you are missing their message.*

What if, for example, you are talking with a client about pesticide use and the client says, “I don’t understand what you’re saying I should do. I’m confused about the amount of pesticide I should use for this crop.” What would be an appropriate way to respond to show that you have heard and understood their request? See sidebar for feedback to possible responses.

- A. Let me make sure I understand. So, you feel pretty confused with how to use pesticides properly?
- B. Let me make sure I understand. You’re wondering about proper pesticide dosage?
- C. Be careful if you don’t know what you’re doing. We don’t want more people dumping extra nitrates in the river.

Reconsider the Situation

“Another strategy that will help you analyze and understand a conflict is reconsidering the situation from a different perspective or with different eyes. We call this *reframing*,” Susan says. “It is useful because a conflict may result from individuals understanding a problem in different ways.

“One important way of reframing a situation is to examine it from the perspective of the person with whom you are having the conflict. Other ways to reframe include asking yourself, ‘How else can I look at this?’ ‘What are the upsides to this situation?’ Or, ‘What would I advise my friend to do in a similar situation?’

“Active listening and open-ended questioning skills are important for understanding various aspects of a conflict. Also, you will want to consider the cultural aspects of the situation. A conflict could be rooted in cultural differences. Reframing the situation is particularly important if you recognize that you and the other person have important cultural or language differences.”

Reconsider in Practice

Consider the irritated client’s comments again.

Audio clip: What do you mean, ‘I can’t burn my trash?’ You guys have so many rules. You know, I bet my neighbor reported on me. He’s always going out of his way to one-up me on my yard. So, yeah, I did

- A. That’s over-reaching. The client may understand pesticides well in other ways and is just worried about proper dosage.
- B. That is a good example of active listening. It shows that you are listening to him, it doesn’t criticize or blame, and it makes sure that you are answering the question he truly has.
- C. This response is critical of the client and is somewhat blaming. The response does not show that you have heard the client’s request. It may contribute to a conflict rather than avoid it.

burn a pile of yard waste and trash. People do it all the time around here. My parents always did it back home, too. Anyway, I had to, I had a big pile and there's no other easy way to get rid of it. I didn't realize it was against the rules. I have more to get rid of, too, and you're going to make it a pain. What difference does it make, anyway?

Recall that you briefly summarized the client's main message. Now, try reframing your perspective. See sidebar for sample answers.

1. What concerns might the client have that he isn't saying?
2. What do you think the client hopes to get out of the interaction?

Identify the Core Problem

A problem that causes a conflict will often seem complicated with a lot of surrounding issues. To fully understand a conflict, it is helpful to identify the core of a problem and separate it from any related issues. Identifying the core of the problem helps you find the source of the conflict. Recognize aspects of the problem that result from or surround the core issue, but deal with them secondarily. Focus your attention on the main problem.

Part of recognizing the core problem is understanding the reasons or motives underlying the conflict. Ask yourself:

- What do I want?
- Why do I want it?
- What does the other person want?
- Why does he/she want it?

The answers to those questions will help you grasp the true core of the conflict and give you better information about the situation, which will help you resolve the conflict.

Listening actively, reframing the situation, and identifying the core problem will give you background information that will allow you to understand a conflict and work toward resolution.

Find Common Ground

"I know we are going over a lot of information," Susan says to her team, "but resolving conflicts successfully often requires some practice and skill. Remind yourself of the list of conflict resolution skills to help you keep track of the skills we are talking about.

"After you understand what is really going on, you want to plan an approach to resolving the conflict. A good way to begin that is to **find common ground and areas of agreement, as well as non-negotiable areas**. Ask open-ended questions to establish the aspects of the problem and possible solutions on which you both agree. Clarify the common ground and use that as a platform from which to develop possible solutions.

"Also, clarify the aspects of the problem that are non-negotiable and that you can't give in on, for example, for legal reasons. After you have identified the

Sample answers:

1. Perhaps he's more worried about how his yard looks than the rules or he doesn't know proper ways to get rid of his yard waste. He may also be feeling guilty about what he did.
2. He may actually want help and information about proper ways to get rid of yard waste that won't get him in trouble.

common ground (what you agree on) and the non-negotiable aspects (what you can't budge on), the remaining aspects of the problem are what you negotiate. As you do so, always keep in mind the core of the problem."

Omar interjects, "So you figure out what you agree on already and set that aside. Then you figure out what the regulations say you cannot negotiate and set that aside. Then you work with whatever is left over when you try to resolve things. Is that right?"



"Yes," replies Susan "that's what I'm saying. You also should **determine the involved parties' willingness to negotiate and promote that willingness.** While pursuing the discussion, find out how willing you and the other individual are to negotiate, collaborate, or compromise. You can use open-ended questions and active listening

to do this. Use both parties' willingness to negotiate as another aspect of common ground from which to build a resolution to the conflict."

Recommend Solutions

"When considering what solutions to recommend, you have a variety of options," Susan continues. "You can recommend solutions that satisfy the other person, but not you, or vice versa. You could propose solutions in which you both gain some of what you want and give up some of what you want. You could also try to find solutions that give you both what you want."

There are essentially four approaches to managing conflict:

- *Accommodation. In this situation, when the problem is unimportant, you give in to the other person's wishes in order to maintain the relationship.*
- *Competition. In this situation you force the other person to give in to your needs because the problem is important and the resolution is non-negotiable.*
- *Compromise. In this situation, you and the other person negotiate so that you each gain some of your interests and give in on some points.*
- *Collaboration. In this situation, you and the other person take time to find a solution to the conflict that satisfies both of your interests.*

"The approach you choose to resolve the conflict," Susan adds, "depends on how important your interests are, how much time you have to resolve the conflict, what non-negotiable areas exist, and how important the relationship is. Use the most appropriate approach to recommend a solution based on all of the information and understanding you have gathered about the situation. Also, be creative in the solutions you recommend. A little creativity may lead you to a solution that satisfies both people's interests even if that doesn't seem possible at first."

Conflict Resolution Skills

Analyze the situation

1. Listen actively
2. Reconsider
3. Identify the core problem

Determine an approach

1. Find common ground
2. Recommend solutions

Negotiate resolution

1. Obtain resources
2. Agree upon a plan

Negotiate Resolution

“Before we end our meeting today,” Susan says, “let’s look at the last steps in resolving a conflict.” She hands her team a page that has the following points on it.

Obtain the necessary resources to bring conflict to a resolution.

If you are personally or emotionally involved in the conflict or if you have difficulty finding common ground, it may be best to find a third party to facilitate, mediate, or arbitrate the conflict resolution.

“You mean we should ask ourselves if we feel angry or insulted or something that might cause us to respond in a way that is counterproductive,” Virginia says after beginning to read. “And I guess sometimes we do need legal assistance to resolve conflicts.”

“You’re right,” replies Susan.

Joe adds, “We might need other help, too. We may need a translator if the other person speaks a different language.”

“Also correct,” answers Susan. “And, as the page says, you may need to bring in a supervisor if the problem is not within your authority to negotiate. Now look at the last tip for conflict resolution.”

Agree upon a plan. Discuss a course of action with the other person.

Make a plan that addresses the *core problem* and resolves the conflict using the *conflict management approach* you chose. Make sure you and the other person both understand the plan in the same way. It is often appropriate to write the plan down, so you both have the same information. Include in the plan a way to check back later to make sure you both followed through as you have agreed. Also, when you check later, make sure the plan was effective in resolving the conflict.

Susan ends by saying, “Let me know if you have questions about this. Since we deal with conflicts all the time, you’ll have plenty of opportunity to practice these tips. Remember, most of the conflict resolution strategy is rooted in being reasonable and respectful.”

See the toolkit for more information about conflict resolution.

Conflict Resolution in Practice

You, the environmental health professional, are visiting a private campground with space for recreational vehicles for an inspection before the Independence Day holiday. You’ve previously warned the owner that the campground’s facilities, particularly the sanitation facilities and the bathing beach areas, don’t meet regulations, and you made recommendations for improvements.

Recently you’ve also received reports that the campground’s water was of questionable quality and “permanent squatters” were living at the site. You don’t find squatters during your inspection, but you do find evidence of long-term use of a camp space. You also find that the owner had not made all the sanitary facility improvements you recommended. You are concerned that the owner needs

to correct all the violations before you allow the park to remain open for the upcoming holiday.

Audio clip: You're telling me the sanitation facility upgrade I did is still not good enough? I know it's important that people are safe, but how much can this really matter? I ought to get out of this line of work and focus on my carpentry business. There's just no money in the campground, especially with all the county's picky standards. I've got to be open for the 4th of July, you know, or I'm going to end up having to sell this place.

Considering your role as an environmental health professional, what is your priority or main concern in this situation? *Sample answer: It is likely that your main concern is making sure the campsite meets regulations and that patrons are safe.*

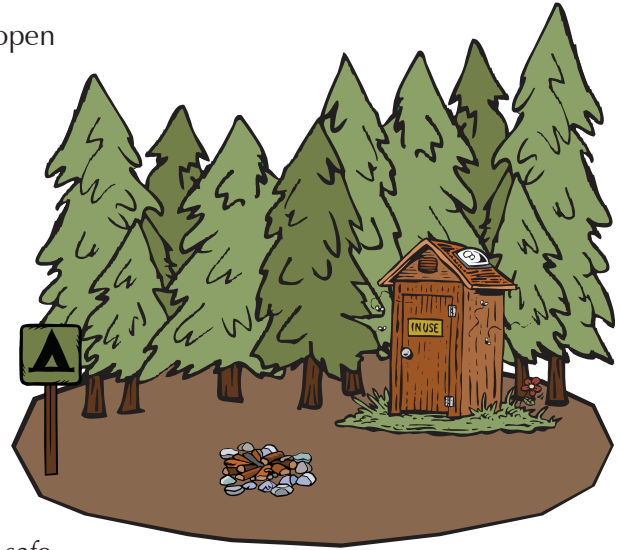
If you reframe the situation to see it from the owner's perspective, what is his main concern? *Sample answer: He is concerned about being able to stay open for the holiday and not losing money.*

What is the core problem that affects you both? *Sample answer: Perhaps the core problem is that you and the campground owner have different standards for what is safe and acceptable for patrons.*

What common ground do you have? What is non-negotiable? *Sample answer: You both want the patrons who visit the campground to be safe and happy with their stay. You will probably not be able to negotiate some standards that the campground must meet.*

What is a possible solution for the conflict? *Sample answer: Perhaps you could reexamine whether the campground owner has met the minimum required standards to be open for the holiday and set a timeline for when the full list of standards must be met.*

What resources might you need to resolve the conflict? *Sample answer: You may want to use a mediator. You may need the written regulations and ordinances to refer to and to share with the campground owner.*



Marketing

Susan and her team are feeling good about the new skills they've learned. They're better prepared as educators and communicators and are better able to handle conflict when it occurs on the job. But she feels that they have yet to cover an important concept: explaining the value of what they do, or in other words, marketing their environmental health efforts. Susan knows it's important to make sure that people understand how the department is making a difference so that it can get political and financial support for the work they do.

Susan decides to start by discussing what environmental public health is with her staff. That way, she hopes, when the opportunity arises, they'll feel comfortable explaining the goals and practices of environmental public health to various audiences as a way of marketing what they do.

Marketing: The capacity to articulate basic concepts of environmental health and public health and convey an understanding of their value and importance to clients and the public.

Define Environmental Public Health

Susan starts by explaining the concept of marketing. “Marketing isn’t just advertising and information brochures. In our case, marketing means being able to talk about the basic concepts of environmental health in a way that will help people understand the value and importance of what we do. Then, ideally, they’ll be motivated to act on our messages. Why else is marketing important to us?”

Omar is quick to reply. “People need to know what we do and why we do it so they’ll know to come to us for help and they’ll consider us as an authority on environmental health issues. We provide a lot of important services. Both we and the public will benefit if people generally understand that.”

“Great,” Susan replies.

She writes on the white board, “Environmental public health addresses the connection between human health and the environment.” “What do you think of this statement?” Susan asks her staff. “Do you think it covers what environmental public health is?”

“Well,” says Virginia, “it’s a pretty broad definition. But I guess environmental health is pretty broad—we do a lot of stuff.”

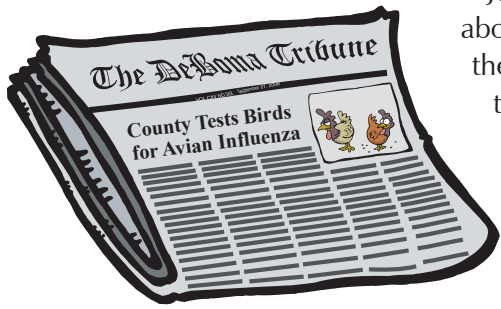
Susan nods in agreement. “Yes, we do. Let’s brainstorm some of the different services that environmental public health provides.” The group quickly compiles this list on the whiteboard:



air & water quality	toxic chemical control
radiation	global environmental
food safety	issues
disaster planning	waste management
& response	land-use planning
healthy housing	community environmental
integrated pest	health assessment
management	public education

Clarify What We Do

“It’s a pretty impressive list, don’t you think? And we could keep adding to it,” Susan says as she looks at her staff. “So, why do you think that so many people in the community don’t really know what we do or how important our services are?”



Joe cautiously says, “I think people hear about a lot of environmental problems on the news, but they don’t realize that we’re the ones who are working on those issues, like pandemic flu or West Nile virus.”

“Good point, Joe,” says Susan encouragingly. “The media cover a lot of what we do, but don’t make it clear that environmental public health

workers are the ones working to solve these

problems. So the question is how we personally can help people understand what we do and why it’s so important.”

“So,” Virginia says, “you’re saying that if I hear one of my clients talk about a West Nile virus or Avian Influenza news report, I should use it as a teachable moment and take an opportunity to market what we are doing? I could talk about what we’re doing about West Nile at the health department and how we are working to keep people safe.”

“That’s right,” Susan says. “So let’s look at how we talk about those things we want to teach or market to people.”

Use Simple Messages

Omar, remembering what they learned about making their messages simple, says, “I guess it would help if we make our marketing message simple and straightforward. Let’s break down that big list of our services into something simpler.”

After the group works on this for a while, they settle on three important themes to use for all of their messages. They think the simplified message will help people understand and be more motivated to use their service.

1. **Prevent Illness:** Environmental public health services play a major role in the prevention of illness. For example, many human diseases have been eliminated because of proper sanitation.
2. **Protect Lives:** Environmental public health plays an active role in preparing for and responding to terrorism, natural disasters, other emergencies, and everyday health and safety.
3. **Save Health Care Costs** by preventing illness: Many environmental conditions affect the health and lives of millions of citizens. By preventing environmental illnesses and deaths, environmental public health saves millions of dollars each year.

“It seems a lot simpler to say that environmental public health is all about preventing illness, protecting lives, and saving health care costs than repeating that huge list of services, don’t you think?” Susan asks.

“And, it might make more sense to most of our clients,” pipes in Virginia.

Susan adds, “Also, it’s important that we all agree on these messages so that when we talk to clients about them, we all **consistently use the same**

Environmental Health Threats in the News:

- Salmonella
- SARS
- Avian flu
- Meth Labs
- *E. coli*
- Anthrax
- Air pollution
- Lead
- Mad Cow (BSE)
- Environmental or natural disasters
- Pesticides
- Norwalk virus



messages. Not only will that reduce confusion among our clients, but it will also make our messages more memorable. Keep it simple and consistent.

“An example of a simple consistent message we can use on printed material is the [APHA](http://www.ephs-apha.org/newsite/index.html) environmental public health marketing line: **Environmental Public Health: Everyone. Everywhere. Every Day.**”

<http://www.ephs-apha.org/newsite/index.html>

Skills for Marketing

“What skills have we learned so far that will help us market environmental public health information in our daily work and even our social exchanges?” Susan asks. “Keep in mind that marketing skills are essentially the same as the skills you’d use for educating, but with a slightly different goal.”

The group lists the following communication skills that they have already discussed:

1. Avoid jargon
2. Teach prevention
3. Be culturally competent
4. Know your audience
5. Use teachable moments
6. Provide simple, accurate information
7. Break messages or recommendations into just a few (three) easy steps

“That’s great,” Susan says. “Those skills are all useful for marketing what we do to the public. I can also think of a few other strategies that would be helpful for marketing our work.

Incorporate stories or anecdotes that describe how environmental health makes a difference. They make a message more memorable and easier for people to relate to.

Describe the benefits of what you do rather than the details of what you do.

Gather feedback from the public about their needs regarding environmental health issues, so we give messages that are relevant to them.

Be consistent. Use the same explanations and messages whenever you talk about a topic.”

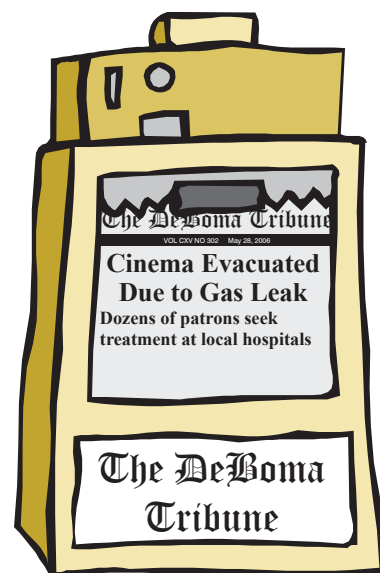
See the toolkit for more information about marketing public health.

Marketing in Practice

The next day, Virginia is waiting in line for the cash register at a gas station. The news stand is next to them. She hears the people behind her comment on a story on the cover of a national newspaper.

Audio clip: Hey, did ya see that story about the chemical leak? I wonder what would happen around here if that plant up river had a chemical leak. I bet the local government’s plan is “don’t tell anyone” and then covers it up.

Assuming the health department is part of a local emergency preparedness



plan that includes large-scale chemical and industrial emergencies, how might Virginia respond? See sidebar for sample answer.

Marketing Environmental Health in Practice

In the next staff meeting, Susan wraps up her discussion of marketing public health by reminding her staff of why it would help them to market what they do. “Remember how frustrated we all get when people don’t seem to know what we’re doing or why we’re doing it? Omar, earlier you said you felt people weren’t listening to you when you told them to limit their pesticide use. If we are able to market to our clients the purpose and value of environmental public health, I think they may be more cooperative and supportive.”



Imagine that Omar is talking with a client about the use of pesticides. Using what you know about marketing environmental public health, what might Omar say to explain the need for the environmental health regulations? See sidebar for sample answer.

Notice how this response uses the messages that the team had agreed on. It is simple and does not use jargon. It tells people the benefit of what we do and places it in the context of prevention.

Communication in Deboma County

“Our communication skills work all began because we were having some specific communication issues,” Susan says. “Omar was worried about getting people to use pesticides responsibly. Virginia, you were concerned because people did not know about our West Nile virus or other disease prevention programs. And Joe, you have had some difficulty with restaurant managers. I’m curious what the three of you have been doing to resolve these issues.”

“I’ve been much more conscious about communication barriers and possible cultural differences,” Joe says. “I can already tell that my relationships with my clients are improving.”

Virginia looks over at him and says, “And you used to say that you’ve done your job so long you had nothing left to learn! I’ve also made some adjustments. I’ve been developing some simple, useful messages about West Nile virus. And I use the same messages whenever I talk about it.”

Omar adds, “I’ve been taking more time with clients and talking more about prevention. I’ve also been getting to know my clients better, so I can understand how and why they use pesticides as they do.”

“This is great,” Susan says, smiling. “It looks like improving our communication is really improving our ability to do our jobs and serve the community. **If we keep consciously practicing good communication skills, soon they’ll become a routine part of what we do.**”

Sample answer: Virginia could explain kindly that she works for the health department and that they do have a plan to respond to emergencies and make sure important information and resources get out to the community. She could explain that they’re working to prevent illness, protect lives, and save both the county and individuals money in health care costs. She could add that anyone who wants to know more about their plans and what they do can check out the health department Web site or call the office.

Sample answer: Environmental public health isn’t just about enforcing regulations. We’re trying hard to prevent illness, protect lives, and save both the county and individuals a lot of money in health care costs. Excess pesticides in the water can make people and animals sick, so we all have to work together to prevent that type of harm.



Summary

From the **educate** competency we covered:

- Asking open-ended questions
- Emphasizing prevention
- Finding teachable moments as opportunities to educate

From the **communicate** competency we went over:

- Providing simple, accurate information
- Knowing your audience
- Avoiding jargon
- Being culturally competent when communicating

From the **conflict resolution** competency we covered:

- How to recognize when conflict resolution is or isn't possible
- Strategies to manage conflicts

From the **marketing** competency we discussed:

- Emphasizing the value of environmental public health
- Tips for marketing environmental public health

Effective communication is an integral part of successful environmental public health programs. If we practice the types of skills listed above, it helps us do our jobs better and build relationships in the community in which we work.

Competencies

This module addresses the following Core Competencies of Environmental Health as defined by the National Center for Environmental Health in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Public Health Association (May, 2001):

Educate: The capacity to use the environmental health practitioner's frontline role to effectively educate the public on environmental health issues and the public health rationale for recommendations.

Communicate: The capacity to effectively communicate risk and exchange information with colleagues, other practitioners, clients, policy makers, interest groups, media, and the public through public speaking, print and electronic media, and interpersonal relations.

Conflict Resolution: The capacity to facilitate resolution of conflicts within the agency, in the community, and with regulated parties.

Marketing: The capacity to articulate basic concepts of environmental health and public health and convey an understanding of their value and importance to clients and the public.

The module also addresses the following Essential Services of Environmental Health:

Inform, educate, and empower people about environmental health issues.

Module Developers

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