

Evaluating effectiveness of communication methods

Action Research Project

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In partial fulfillment of ILT 6720: Spring 2008

Abstract

Communication is defined as "the art and technique of using words effectively to impart information or ideas" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.answers.com>). Questions have arisen as to the effectiveness of communication from the state office to the grantee school contacts, who are participating in the Reading First grant. Analysis of the data collected was to determine if communication such as email and webinars are reaching our audience in a timely and consistent manner, whether we are meeting the original goals set out in our electronic newsletter, and what areas we need to make improvement in for the upcoming grant year. The results of this research indicate that communication methods are effective dependent of message but improvement can be made in the timeliness of communication. Further gathering of data and analysis towards improvement methodology should be ongoing and frequently given consideration.

Introduction

I began working in my current position in January, 2007 as the Communications Coordinator for the Competitive Grants and Awards Unit, at the Colorado Department of Education, specifically with the federal Reading First grant. My role as Communications Coordinator involves orchestrating all of the major communications involving Reading First, between those of us in administration at the state level to the Regional Consultants, Local Education Agency contacts, Principals and Reading Coaches at our grantee schools.

In the first four years of the grant, the communication was done primarily through email and a bimonthly update (word document) which focused on important dates. This update was sent electronically through a list-serve to individuals at our grantee schools.

Shortly after I began my position, it was determined by the leadership steering members that a new approach to the communication should be taken. This decision came about after looking at the current process and asking ourselves what the goals of communication were. The first goal that we arrived at included teaching our school participants about reading by furthering their knowledge of scientific-based research practices. The second goal would be to keep our schools informed of all professional development activities that were required of them. Thirdly, we found the need to explain policies and procedures to our grantees. And lastly, we wanted to use communication as an avenue to present professional development topics to our grantees.

It was decided that to accomplish these goals, an official Colorado Reading First

newsletter would be developed. This newsletter would include several areas of focus. Those areas included teaching reading concepts or methodology; important dates; policies and fundamentals of the grant; professional development; and a calendar indicating coaching and other professional development trainings for that month. Various staff members would contribute articles of interest to this newsletter, and I would be responsible for gathering the articles, formatting the newsletter and electronically publishing the newsletter once per month.

Currently, our communication with the grantee schools includes this newsletter, random emails announcing upcoming online webinars and conference information, and emails that come from our professional development contractor announcing registration for an upcoming event.

Rationale for this action research project

The federal government has authorized grant dollars to continue Reading First for at least one additional year. This will allow Colorado to support a fourth year within our second cohort. Although there will not be the same amount of money flowing from the grant to the schools, there will be opportunities to support our schools and the efforts they are making with Reading First. With fewer resources it is imperative that we as a leadership team look at all of our processes, including communication, to ensure that those processes are efficient. Before year four of the grant begins, (July 2008), I plan to research the entire communication process, and try to discover if it still achieves what we set out for goals as a unit.

Additional research questions that may be asked and answered during this process are numerous. These questions include: do we have the human resources available to produce such an ambitious newsletter in the coming year? Is the newsletter providing too much information in

our grantee schools at one time? What type of feedback do we have to support this? Do we need to simplify our communication to a one-page itemized sheet of upcoming dates, accompanied by emails several times throughout the month to make sure that all the highlights, dates and opportunities are hit? Are there ways that we can streamline the current process?

In the action research readings by McNiff and Whitehead (2006), a series of pertinent questions have been provided that allowed me to develop a plan for this action research study. Throughout this discovery and planning stage, I began to layout for myself answers that helped guide me through this process. Following is a brief overview of the answers to some of those questions.

What is my concern? The primary question that will drive this action research study is "how do I determine that the methods currently used for communication with the CRF schools are effective, if the methods are still producing the targeted outcomes for the communication goals and how can I improve those methods?"

Why am I concerned? The values that I believe are a driving force behind this research are that schools should be connected and feel supported by those of us administering the grant. Furthermore, it is imperative that schools are able to be effective in their work and through the efforts of the grant. Communication from administration becomes a critical factor in those efforts. A final value is that we should be good stewards of our grant moneys. We should utilize our time efficiently and effectively and that includes the time and resources needed in our communication efforts.

Am I living towards the values that I have determined? The answer to this question, in

some respects, is yes and in others no. I think the answer to this may solidify itself as the research process proceeds.

What kinds of experience can I describe to show why I am concerned? There have been verbalized concerns from the field about the communication from administration. There have been complaints from some about not being in the loop of communications because those communications are not provided in a timely manner. I also receive weekly requests from the field to check our list-serves and database due to the fact that they have not been receiving the newsletter.

What kind of data will I gather to show the situation as it unfolds? I would like to conduct an email or some type of electronic survey for principals, reading coaches and the Regional Consultants about communication methods and ask specifically for ways that they believe it could be improved. More specific data collection information will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

By doing additional readings on communication, I hope to find ways to strengthen the channels of communication between our administrative office and our grant schools. Finally, I believe that the use of a validation group-be it my fellow graduate students or those within my work setting-will be very important for generating ideas and receiving the constructive criticism needed to improve the study and interpret the data that is gathered.

Data collection methods

As stated previously, the questions that guided my research and data gathering included the following:

1. Are the methods currently used for communication with the CRF schools effective? This may include a new definition of effective.
2. Do those methods produce the targeted outcomes for the communication goals and how can I improve those methods?
3. Does the newsletter achieve what we set out as goals between our administrative team and the grantee schools?
4. Do we have the human resources available to produce such an ambitious newsletter in the coming year?
5. Is the newsletter providing too much information in our grantee schools at one time? What type of feedback do we have to support this?
6. What are alternative communication methods and approaches? Do we need to simplify our communication to a one-page itemized sheet of upcoming dates, accompanied by emails several times throughout the month to make sure that all the highlights, dates and opportunities are hit?
7. What are ways that we can streamline the current process?

The questions that I posed framed the basis for this research. Gathering data for this study

helped to answer those questions, and will provide direction for changing the methods and approach used in communicating to the grantee schools. Potential change in the methods and approach will ensure that schools have the information necessary to accomplish the goals of the Reading First grant and will be successful in their efforts.

The process of gathering data is to generate evidence (McNiff and Whitehead, 2006, pp. 145). The initial point of my data gathering began with a review of all past emails to find comments that have been made regarding the communication process, and effectiveness of that process in the individual schools. I also reviewed all of the saved emails that I have that provide specific complaints and suggestions about the communication methods currently in place. Finally, I looked for specific examples of emails that specify the newsletter as an effective, or ineffective, means of communication with our schools. In a review of those emails, I also looked for comments that would indicate whether the process and methods, which include the emails and newsletter, are still accomplishing the communication goals that we have deemed important.

In order to answer the fourth question that is driving this research project, “do we have the human resources available to produce such an ambitious newsletter in the coming year?” I began the process of creating a reflection journal. In this journal I documented the hours I worked each week, what the primary projects I was working on, and what time I was currently spending on the communication processes to the grantee schools. Over the next few weeks, I had anticipated that this information would prove very informative, as our unit continued to be understaffed and my personal project workload had increased substantially in recent weeks.

I also gathered data in the form of emails that reflect the number of requests I received on average within the past year from individuals stating that they were not receiving emails. These

emails request our assistance to check the status of individual and school email addresses.

Identifying the reasons behind those missed emails did prove challenging. My rationale was that if we could find the reasons, our communication process could be streamlined, just based on the amount of resources necessary to recheck this type of information.

There were many verbal comments made to me from constituents in the field over this past year. I planned to write these individuals and ask if they would be willing to share their comments in written format. Due to the time frame for all of the above described data to be gathered, this data collection will be a future part of my ongoing action research.

Lastly, I constructed a brief survey that was emailed to principals, reading coaches, and the regional consultants with questions specific to the types of communication methods used from our office, the timeliness of those communications, and the accurateness of the information contained within. I asked individuals to email, or print and fax, their completed surveys to me. I gave individuals the option of responding anonymously to the survey, and was open to any written comments and further opportunities for verbal exchanges.

Although the time frame for this action research process was concluded by the end of April, the spring conferences were held in the middle of April, and may have provided an opportunity to speak directly with our school participants. This included principals, reading coaches and teachers. I was unable to pursue gathering data at these conferences due to my continued involvement as coordinator for the May CDE conference that is within weeks of the CRF conferences.

After the data was gathered for this action research study, I used the criteria outlined in

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) for turning data into evidence. This process was outlined to include making a claim to knowledge; establishing criteria and standards of judgment; selecting data and finally generating evidence. More is written about this process in the data methods and results section of this work.

Literature Review

According to the website Answers.com, communication is defined as "the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, signals, writing, or behavior." From that same website, the word is extended to mean "the art and technique of using words effectively to impart information or ideas" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.answers.com>). The Colorado Reading First staff agrees communication is an essential component for the success of the grantee schools. But questions have arisen as to the effectiveness of that communication from the state office to the schools, specifically to the regional consultants, local education agency contacts, principals and reading coaches and extending to the teachers in K-3 who are participating in the Reading First grant.

For this literature review, I read articles that looked at several avenues with respect to communication, primarily focusing effective communication methods. Through the process of this literature review, I hoped to gain a clearer understanding of what we are doing well at CRF and why those methods are working, what can be improved upon, and what needs to dramatically change to increase the probability that our communication to the grantee schools is effective.

The primary questions I focused on to complete this literature review included: how is

effective communication defined? What are the components that make up a successful communication approach? What are the factors that make up effective email and electronic newsletter communication? How does the communication between virtual teams apply to the relationships CRF administrators have with our remote school?

I believe our unit does understand the importance of effective communication and would agree with Bryd and Gulbro (1998) in that "effective and efficient communication is one key to an organization's success. The ultimate goal is to provide necessary and timely information, while maintaining and enhancing employee morale and by encouraging innovative ideas and solutions to current problems" (p. 14).

In budgeting for the Communications Coordinator position for Reading First, the processes and methods associated with communication were deemed important. That role also includes building positive public relations by keeping our schools informed. As part of a public relations scheme, the foundations for effective communications include "anticipating and meeting the needs of clients...and providing informed and useful counsel. Solid research, strong writing skills, creativity, and an appreciation for ... your client's audiences are the backbone of the profession, regardless of how information is packaged" (Lordan, 1999, p. 15).

Multiple studies indicate that no matter what method is used, for effective communication to occur, you must allow for feedback from the receiver back to the sender. According to Byrd and Gulbro (1998), the essential components of effective communication include feedback, reinforcement of words with actions, use of repetition; and active listening" (p. 14). From the Revision.Co.UK website, I learned about "the importance of the two-way nature of communication in which the success of the process depends heavily upon the sender receiving

feedback. The sender requires assurance that his or her points are being received and understood...It is the use of a common system of symbols, signs and behavior in exchange for information, ideas and emotions" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.revision-notes.co.uk/revision/947.html>).

A number of factors can interfere with communication. "Talking is not communicating. Writing is not communication. Ideas are only communicating when they understood by the listener or reader" (Wolpin, 2007, p. 6). There can be language barriers which do not refer to Spanish, English or Arabic translation. These barriers refer to disciplines each having their own lingo, jargon and acronyms "including government officials who are among the pioneers in constructing confusing language" (Wolpin, 2007, p. 6), attention deficit disorder defined as "the never ending assault on our eyes and ears-courtesy of our technologic breakthroughs such as emails" (Wolpin, 2007, p. 6) and "evolutionary clutter from the constantness of email" (Wolpin, 2007, p. 6). The conclusions drawn are reflective of what others have said: "being in front of someone and picking up the telephone rather than emailing, are the most effective ways to communicate important ideas" (Wolpin, 2007, p. 6).

Lordan (1999) refers to "the hyperspeed process" which has occurred in information distribution and the importance of integrating all communication activities "so that members can take advantage of every way you have to communicate" (p. 15). Our Reading First email and newsletters do make this attempt, as we strive to keep important dates for upcoming events reflective of each other. The one area that is lacking within the communication process is the use of our website which has not been given priority for several months.

Other barriers to effective communication were reviewed at The Revision.Co.UK website

(<http://www.revision-notes.co.uk>). All of these barriers can occur if the sender of the communication "has failed to convey the meaning or the importance of the message." The barriers include:

sender breakdown-too much information is being sent, so the recipient misses key points;
language can be difficult to understand, as it can be too complex;

method breakdown-when information is very detailed or complicated, then written instructions are better than messages which can be misinterpreted;

recipient breakdown-the recipient deliberately makes a choice to misinterpret the message because of their attitude to either the sender to the message at hand (Retrieved March 27, 2008, <http://www.revision-notes.co.uk>).

The conclusion from this website substantiates what other sources indicate-there are many barriers communication experts must be aware of and they must look for ways to hurdle those obstacles to effective communication.

Sending the communications through the right channel is another component of effectiveness. The study by Level (1972) researched whether oral or written communication is a more effective method. His study indicates that a combination of methods, highly dependent on the situation, may be the most effective. One primary conclusion drawn from this study is that communication requiring immediate action is best handled with an oral and written approach (Level, 1972). For those situations where information was general or required some future action, the written-only method of communication was considered the most effective. Wolpin (2007) clarifies the use of oral versus written communication in a brief commentary. He

summarizes his outlook on email with the following statement: "E-mails are appropriate for incidental thoughts, but complex ideas that will affect people's lives require your full attention and the attention of the person you want to reach. Then, and only then, can you begin to try to communicate, using simple, concise and jargon-free language that is delivered eye to eye, or at least ear to ear" (p. 6). "Technology now allows anyone with E-mail to move information throughout the organization, posing questions or suggesting new product ideas to any individual, regardless of their location or status" (Shaffer, 2005, p. 18)

In the study of electronic channels in employee communication preferences, Sinickas (2005) discusses the impact of push versus pull communication. Employees would rather receive pushed communication, in the form of newsletters and emails when dealing with specific topics, including employee recognition and company news or when "there is something new they should know about" (p. 44). Very few individuals prefer print sources solely as their choices for communication methods (Sinickas, 2005). Overall, employees do not want to rely on electronic means of communication either, specifically email and electronic newsletters, in part due to the fact that people have the desire "to stop staring at their computer screens and read printed materials" (p. 40). The types of messages influence the best practices for communications in workgroups (Zack, 2004). Therefore best practice for communication at CRF would include both electronic and print sources within the organization.

Better understanding of which communication method to use in a more systematic way may help to further define our effectiveness at Colorado Reading First. With all of the electronic means of communication we have at our disposal, the question may still remain as to whether enough time and effort is being given to face-to-face communication. Hess (2008) notes that

"electronic communication seems to overwhelm face-to-face communication...the most value-added element in any employee communication program" (p. 48). Boss (1999) supports the importance of face-to-face communication. "The more ways there are to communicate long distance, the more business people insist on face-to-face meetings...people are spending more time than ever in face-to-face meetings and say they don't plan on that changing" (p. 15). This statement was made years before email and mass communications took on the form they have today and perhaps still has relevance to our communication methods today. Zack (2004) indicates communications about specific events requires face-to face communication. These events would include "highly interactive discourse, or the need for more than a one-way message," (p. 232) for example email.

In Byrd and Gulbro's study, active listening which is defined as "listening for content and feelings, responding to feelings, recognizing both verbal and nonverbal information, and reflecting back to the source interpretation of the message often requires face-to-face communications" (Byrd & Gulbro, 1998, p. 14). According to Kumuyi (2007), "communication is an exchange, not a monologue. It isn't complete and fulfilling until the receiver has given his response to the message of the sender. You can't be sure that your message has been received and understood if you received no response" (p. 22).

Many studies and websites provide general information on how to communicate more clearly and to take the necessary steps toward effective communication. The communication guide from the Well Adjusted Life website outlines "five ways to communicate clearly and effectively" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.welladjusted.org.uk./get/commguide.pdf>) and is focused at accessibility for all

communications.

Keeping communication clear and comfortable...the use of plain English and avoiding passive sentence, jargon and archaic language...providing considerate choices for all users which means that online print and design should be kept simple...break up paragraphs with charts and diagrams...and users should be provided a variety of ways to give feedback" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.welladjusted.org.uk./get/commguide.pdf>).

These are challenges to me, the Communications Coordinator, as I begin to examine the message, content and clarity with which I write and send communications to the field.

Email communication method is one of the most widely used methods within the CRF office. Email has been defined as "a mode of communication that allows for near instantaneous transmission of information and seems to demand near instantaneous response" (Weinstock, 2004, p. 366). Cunningham and Greene (2002) discuss practical directions for choosing email as a communication method. Summarizing their findings, I found that choosing the right style, being cautious with content, determining when to use email and when not to use email and making your email easy on your reader (Cunningham & Greene, 2002) all add to effective communication. Choosing to write clearly in email is important due to the inability of the recipient to see the sender and detect the emotion behind the message. Weinstock (2004) quotes Shapiro and Anderson in stating that "perhaps the attribute of electronic mail systems that most distinguish them from other forms of communication is their propensity to evoke emotion in the recipient-very likely because of the likelihood that the recipient will then fire off a response that exacerbates the situation" (p. 368).

Effective communication within the CRF office requires reaching multiple people simultaneously and efficiently. This "communication network is a valuable management tool that allows the communication of objectives, priorities and deadlines that leads to coordinated action. The e-mail system can facilitate timely written communications within and between companies" (Byrd & Gulbro, 1998, p. 14). I will continue to work to establish effective email practices for our Reading First communications.

Not all of the communications by email are sent to LEA contacts, principals and coaches. Working with the CRF Coordinator, we determine who will be receiving which emails. This process is validated by the Iowa State website "if you will be making repeated contacts, it is more effective to only contact those people who have opted to receive those notifications rather than blanketing a group of whom only some are interested" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.it.iastate.edu/policies/massemail/>).

According to the Iowa State website, questions should be asked to determine if email is the most appropriate method because "for some announcements, other methods (newsletters, online postings, etc.) may be more effective in reaching the audience" (Retrieved March 27, 2008, from <http://www.it.iastate.edu/policies/massemail/>). Although this initial literature review did not uncover many research studies surrounding the use of electronic newsletters, our CRF schools have expressed the desire for this publication. The Iowa State website states "the most effective communication method is often one that uses an existing communication channel. Presenting your news or information in a publication that your target audience is already reading can increase the probability of your item being read. A key point is that the news or announcement must be relevant to the publication and, thus, to the audience" (Retrieved March

27, 2008, from <http://www.it.iastate.edu/policies/massemail/>). Moving forward into Year 4 of this cohort, I am reminded that the recipients of the newsletters are now familiar with this communication tool and the method by which is distributed. Keeping the news relevant to the audience will be a continued goal for the publication.

How does the communication between virtual teams apply to the relationships CRF administrators have with our remote schools? Do we, in a sense, have multiple virtual teams, especially when factoring in the role that the Regional Consultants play, as they communicate, evaluate, and coordinate between the grantee schools and the CRF administrative office? If we view our relationship with these remote schools more like a virtual team, we need to continue to incorporate face-to-face time with the school leadership. The type of media communication that we choose must be appropriate to the task and the message.

Virtual teams employ additional technologies. Along with email and internet access, these technologies can include videoconferencing, blackboard or other classroom learning portal, chats, wikis and blogs. The preference for mass emails may actually increase as more electronic channels are available at a company (Sinickas, 2005, p. 41). Some of the biggest hurdles that occur within virtual teams include motivation, technology and interaction (Rutkowski, et al., 2002). Yet, “the fact that electronic communication relies on a fast spread of information...stimulates both problem solving and creative activities” (Rutkowski, et al., 2002, p. 227).

In providing specific techniques for classroom use, targeted at the reading coaches and teachers, the CRF leadership attempts a form of virtual mentoring within the electronic newsletter. These techniques are aimed to coaches for the development of proficient readers and

may include active engagement and comprehension strategies. There are advantages and disadvantages of virtual mentoring (Colky & Young, 2006).

Maznevski and Chudoba (2002) “highlight the importance of face-to-face meetings, if possible, particularly in the early stages of a team's life and for teams faced with tasks that require a high degree of interdependence. Face-to-face meetings can facilitate strong relationships between team members and minimize potential conflict that may arise in the future” (p.473).

It is important to choose the appropriate communication media to fit the requirements of the task and the message (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2002). Rich media, such as meetings or conference calls, are necessary “when a high level of interdependence defines the task or the message is complex. Under less demanding conditions, a less rich medium, such as e-mail, is quite acceptable” (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000, p. 473).

Assuming electronic communication volume goes up in virtual organizations, the pressure for communication efficiency should also occur. “Gains in communication efficiency for a given task, especially problem solving tasks, may be difficult to achieve electronically...problem solving and task completion are not faster when electronically mediated” (DeSanctis & Monge, 1998). This study again emphasizes the importance of choosing which media to use in communicating specific message types.

Further analysis and review of the connection between electronic communication and the need for face-to-face interaction, along with best practices for communications within virtual teams may be the key to balancing the communication channels in use within the

Colorado Reading First unit.

Data gathering methods

An email survey was sent to 106 total recipients. (See Appendix A). This number included 49 Reading First principals, 49 reading coaches and eight regional consultants. Fifty-one surveys were returned, representing a 48% return. Eleven of those surveys returned indicated that two individuals had combined their answers into one survey, reflecting a 58% participation rate for the survey.

A review of all requests for email changes, plus returned emails, was completed for the time period from March 2007 through early April 2008. This period is reflective of the time that I have been employed as the Communications Coordinator for Colorado Reading First.

Finally, a brief journal logging weekly hours worked and hours spent on Reading First was completed from February 25, 2008 through March 24, 2008.

Survey results and analysis

When asked to rank the method of communication preferred for announcing upcoming events and deadlines (question one), the respondents ranked a preference for email followed by Touching Base (electronic newsletter), webinars, phone and hardcopy mail. (Table 1) Calculating percentages for these preferences was not possible due to the disparity amongst the actual number of individuals completing this question.

Table 1
Question 1-Preferred Method of Communication

						Total # of Responses
Ranked Preference	1	2	3	4	5	
Touching Base	6	16	8	1	1	32
Email	37	5				42
Webinars	0	9	10	8	9	36
Phone	1	6	7	17	5	36
Hardcopy	0	2	9	11	12	34

Ninety-two percent of the respondents indicated yes, that they receive communications from CRF often enough. Eighty-one percent of the respondents indicated yes, that they receive communications from CRF in a timely fashion.

When asked how often they would like to receive Touching Base (electronic newsletter) in the coming year, 80% indicated monthly, 14% bimonthly, with less than 3% indicating weekly or twice per year.

As for ranking the subject content within Touching Base, out of 40 responses, 73% indicated that updates on events and deadlines was the most important, followed by professional development opportunities and practical tips for teachers. (Table 2)

Table 2
Question 5-Preference of Content within Touching Base

Ranked preference	1	2	3	4	5	Total # of Responses
Updates	29	4	5	1	1	40
PD Opportunities	6	19	11	1	0	37
Practical Tips	5	12	11	9	1	38
Articles from CDE	1	0	2	3	0	6
Online Info	1	2	7	19	0	29
Nothing					6	6

Distribution of the original electronic newsletter is completed electronically (73%) at the school level, with an additional 19% hard copy distribution. Three respondents also commented that they used excerpts from the newsletter for other educational opportunities within their schools.

In addition to analyzing the rankings provided on the survey to questions one through six, I also received over seven pages of comments by the survey respondents. Table three reflects the total number of comments for each question throughout the survey.

Table 3
Number of Responses by Question

Question	Number of Responses
1	1
2	11
3	20
4	3
5	2
6	10
7	25
8	19

Coding for questions one through three comments were initially tagged with positive (P), negative (N) and suggestions for improvement (I).

As the responses for question seven were reviewed, a pattern emerged which allowed the data to be coded for specific requests for the electronic newsletter in the upcoming year. These tags included data (Data), sustainability (Sustain), learning from other schools (LS), coaching (Coaching), parent tips (ParentT), integration of technology (Techno), updates (Updates) and research (Research). A color coding system was utilized to reflect this pattern. (Table 4)

Table 4
Coding for Survey Comments

Reference	Color Code
Touching Base	(Touching Base)
Data	(Data)
Sustainability	(Sustain)
Learning from other schools	(LS)
Coaching	(Coaching)
Parents	(ParentT)
Integration of technology	(Techno)
Updates	(Updates)
Research	(Research)
Webinars	(Webinars)

Question eight was coded with the initial tags used in for questions one through three: positive (P), negative (N) and suggestions (I). There were responses that reflected the coding used in question seven, therefore these tags were added as well.

After completion of the coding for questions seven and eight, further review of the written responses throughout the rest of the document allowed the addition of those same codes

plus codes when the comments were specific to Touching Base, or webinars. All previous questions with comments were reviewed again and these codes were added throughout the document as appropriate. The completed coding for the survey can be seen in Appendix B. The summary of the coded comments is shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Summary of Coded Comments

Reference	Total # of Comments	% of Total Comments
Touching Base	6	12
Data	5	10
Sustainability	3	6
Learning from other schools	12	24
Coaching	2	4
Parents	2	4
Integration of technology	3	6
Updates	3	6
Research	4	8
Webinars	10	20

The comments for questions four through six did not lend themselves to the above coding and were thus set aside for this initial analysis. However, those additional comments are available for review in this discussion and may be analyzed at a later date.

Further Survey Analysis

There were a total of 38 positive comments, 24 negative comments and 23 comments that provided a specific suggestion for improvement throughout the document. Out of the total of 62 responses, this reflects 61% positive and 38% negative. 37% of those comments also provided a

suggestion for improvement, which will be very helpful in planning communications for the upcoming year, as well as making adjustments throughout the rest of this year. Overall, it appears that participants are satisfied with the frequency and timeliness of communication. As for specific suggestions for improvement that could be made, 20% of all comments involved the use of webinars for communication. One item of note: the week that the survey was sent to the schools, CRF leadership conducted a webinar. The announcement for this webinar was less than one week prior to the actual online meeting. I believe that the webinar event and late announcement were reflected in this survey especially with the improvement comments that frequently mentioned webinars.

The results of the coding for question seven show future editions of Touching Base (electronic newsletter) should include examples from other successful schools implementing Reading First, accounting for 24% of the specific comments cited, articles on data (10%), and research (8%).

Although only 6% of the total comments indicated a request for the integration of technology into the communication methods used by CRF, the comments were specific. These included the method of distribution for communication, the use of the world wide web for resources and the desire for a learning community for additional sharing amongst the grantees.

Results and analysis of email request review

The results of the review for all requests for email changes, plus returned emails, are indicated in Table 6.

Table 6
Summary of Email Changes

Principal changes	18
Reading Coach Changes	14
Local Education Agency contact changes	10
Remove contact	9
Updates	14
Additional Requests	3

Of the total of 88 email changes required, 48% of those requests were due to principal, coach and LEA changes at the school or district level. These are changes that CRF has no real control over. It should be noted that a second review of these requests show that frequently more than one request for a change occurs within several days of each other. Analysis of these data also indicated that 79 out of 88 (90%) of the email requests occurred between March and November 2007, with the remaining 10% of requests (9 out of 88) occurring between January and April 2008. This time frame would be consistent with personnel changes within an academic year. We would anticipate changes in leadership at the grantee schools particularly as one year ends and the next one begins.

Results and analysis of journal

The journal was very brief, consisting of only three pages type-written. Coding of this document indicates impending deadlines that I did not feel I would make, along with the time for CRF communication and my responsibilities for CRF activities being minimized primarily due to the planning and organizing for the CDE conference consuming most of my time. It is noted in the journal entries that both March and February Touching Base newsletters would be late.

Conclusions

Overall, it appears that participants are satisfied with the frequency and timeliness of communication. The results of the coding from the survey reflect the need for continued improvement in the subject matter of what is offered in Touching Base, and will require a team effort to gather the content that meets the requests and desires of the grantee participants.

My reflection from the comments surrounding the use of technology for communication is that there are individuals in the grantee schools who are willing and able to use electronic communication methods and other technology options in the upcoming months. We, as a leadership team, should be open to exploring additional means of communication, and work to improve those that are currently in place.

As for conclusions based on the analysis of the email changes review, there is an opportunity to streamline the process. When a request is received by our office, there are four lists and databases that must also be changed. These include the contact database, the list serve for Reading First located on the web, the Outlook contact lists, and the roster of sites and names, a word document located on a local server. Although not difficult tasks to perform, the

administrative assistant has frequently commented on the time-intensive nature of making these changes. Awareness of the frequency, as well as the nature of these requests, should be ongoing within this unit. This will help eliminate any potential communication failing to reach the intended target, preventing the breakdown of communication between the CRF office and grantees and decreasing negative comments associated with that breakdown. Currently, the administrative assistant completes a review in June of each year of our contacts and makes changes to the four lists. A more frequent and systematic approach to updating the database, list serve, Outlook contact lists and roster would reduce the number of requests for changes throughout the rest of the year, promoting a more positive workflow within the CRF office, as well as ensuring that all communication reaches its intended audience the first time that communication is sent.

The results of the journal entries clearly indicate that during the coordinating and planning for the yearly CDE conference, the communication coordinator for Reading First will not be able to meet all of the necessary CRF communication timelines. If a particular project, like the conference, takes priority over the Reading First communication, more than likely communication will suffer. This was reflected in the lateness of the Touching Base newsletter for the months of February and March, the lack of timeliness in announcing upcoming webinars and some of the general confusion amongst grantee participants that has ensued. A more organized and thought-out process must be implemented for Year 4 to consistently communicate dates and times of webinars and other professional development events, consistent processing of budgets for schools and maintaining accurate communication to the schools. Any planning that could be done earlier for the CDE conference might also prevent breakdowns in the flow of

communication—communication that is necessary to keep the grantee schools informed of all activities and deadlines.

Overall, the analysis of these data components, and my self-reflection throughout this experience, indicate that we at CRF do use sound methods for communication. Our methods are consistent with those used in virtual teams and the qualitative data suggests that overall we utilize the most effective methods dependent of message. We as a unit do have opportunities to improve the timeliness of communication. Further gathering of data and analysis towards improvement methodology should be ongoing and frequently given consideration.

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Appendix A: Survey for Schools, including Principals, Coaches also Regional Consultants

What method of communication for upcoming events and deadlines do you prefer?

Rank in order

Touching Base (electronic newsletter)

Email

Webinars

Phone calls

Hard copy letters

Do you feel that you receive communications from CRF often enough?

Yes

No

Comments:

Do you feel that you receive communications from CRF in a timely fashion?

Yes

No

Comments:

How often would you like to receive Touching Base (electronic newsletter) in the coming year?

Weekly

Bi-monthly

Monthly

Fall and Spring

Never

Rank in order what you find the most useful in Touching Base:

Updates on Events and Deadlines

Professional development opportunities

Practical tips for classroom application

Articles and press releases from CDE

Online course information

Nothing in Touching Base is useful to our school

How do you share the information in Touching Base with your teachers?

I send electronically to those I have email addresses for

I make hard copies and distribute them to the teachers

I take excerpts from the newsletter and put in our school newsletter

I don't distribute the newsletter

What additional news would you like to see in Touching Base this next year?

Additional comments or concerns about Touching Base or other communication methods through Colorado Reading First?

Appendix B: Subjective comments provided by the survey respondents along with the completed coding.

Question 1. What method of communication for upcoming events and deadlines do you prefer?

Rank in order Touching Base (electronic newsletter) 2 This is especially good for summarizing and reminding

Email 1 This is the best source of notification for me

Webinars 5 much too burdensome for notifications

Phone calls 4 It's too easy to miss phone calls and even messages.

Hard copy letters 3 Time and effort (and cost) are the difficulty here.

Question 2. Do you feel that you receive communications from CRF often enough?

I think we get them often enough, but sometimes it seems that they could get them out sooner before an event when we need to bring things. (P) (I)

I believe that we are receiving quality and sufficient communication from CRF. (P)

Yes, communications are frequent, timely and clear. (P)

I feel that CRF communicates very often with the full time coach, less often with the .5 coach. She does forward all pertinent information to me so that I am not out of the loop. (N) (P)

I would like to see information regarding Webinars and coaches trainings come out a little sooner. A few days makes scrambling for information a little difficult. (I) (N) (Webinars)

Yes-you usually let us know about upcoming events. The only exception has been the BEAR webinar. Somehow, that one took me by surprise; I did not know it was coming up. (P) (N) (I) (Webinars)

It doesn't seem that Touching Base is coming out as regularly as is had been. (N) (I) (Touching Base)

Communication is timely. I appreciate the reminders (registrations, etc). (P)

Touching Base has not come at an expected time this year. I would like to receive Touching Base more frequently or a monthly calendar with all pertinent dates on it for that month. (N) (I) (Touching Base)

We are informed as events and upcoming things are about to happen. There is also miscommunication about what is CRF appropriate and not. Too many people make decisions and are inconsistent with each other. (N)

Yes in general, though for a period of time, communication seemed sketchy. We also lost touch with Touching Base, but then rediscovered it online. (P) (I) (Touching Base)

Question 3. Do you feel that you receive communications from CRF in a timely fashion?

We received some last minute notices during the middle of this school year, but things seem to have smoothed out. (N) (P)

When it is information going to all districts, it is often enough. When it is information going to specific districts, it is not always timely. (P) (N) (I)

No- for instance I arrived at schools this morning and found out that I have a BEAR webinar today at 1:00. I have had to rearrange my whole day to accommodate this. (N) (Webinar)

Yes for most things. (P)

No-Mandatory training dates for year 4 should already be set to allow district calendar development to incorporate those. (N) (I)

I would like to see information regarding Webinars and coach trainings come out a little sooner. A few days makes scrambling for information a little difficult. (N) (I) (Webinar) (Coaching)

There have been times when information has been in conflict with previous information such as coding demographics on DIBELS vs the use of coding available from SASID. Several emails have been sent and then retracted later in the same day. (N) (I) (Data)

Sometimes it's very timely and other times it is not. It's not consistent (N)

Every year we are receiving responses to our questions in a timelier manner. We really do appreciate this improvement. However, it has been a long process receiving approval for our revisions to our year 3 budget. We expected a more timely response to our revised items. (P) (N) (I)

I know that the decision process sometimes takes more time than we would like, but the decisions seem to be communicated to us appropriately. (P)

For the most part-a few times things have been given on short notice and this makes it difficult to comply within the deadline. (P) (N) (I)

This depends on who I receive the info from specifically. I receive information from the CDE offices in a timely manner and often enough. I don't get adequate communication from the regional coaches or the sopris coaches. (P) (N) (I)

Yes for the most part; our RC really helps out. (P)

Most of the time we are informed with enough time to make adjustments to our busy lives. There have been some instances early in 2008 when there was not enough time to make the changes. (P) (N)

Yes. Occasionally, information is delayed, but I don't feel this is the fault of CRF. An example of this was when we had to wait longer than expected to find out about 4th year funding. (P) (I)

Recently, the BEAR webinar was new information and being out for spring break I was not aware of it until this morning. We need to know required dates ahead of time so we can rearrange our schedules accordingly. (N) (I) (Webinar)

Yes. Most of the time I feel that we are given timely information. (P)

Sometimes- need to be aware of school vacation dates. (P) (I)

Sometimes there is not enough lead time for workshops. (N) (I)

Yes – most of the time. Would like future PD days to be set sooner than they are. (P) (I)

Question 4. How often would you like to receive Touching Base (electronic newsletter) in the coming year?

Bi-monthly - as needed with new information (Ranked 2)

This is good, but I have so much to read that I personally do better with shorter amounts – more frequent. This may be different for teachers, coaches and building personnel.

They probably would also like this more often.

I think monthly would be sufficient, though it might depend on the amount and urgency of updates and news.

Question 5. Rank in order what you find the most useful in Touching Base:

While the online courses have contained valuable information, they have proven to be the least desirable by our staff. The classes are very time intensive and we have received no feedback on our written responses.

All the information is useful, but for my position Updates on Events and Deadlines are the most critical. My districts and Instructional Coach I believe benefit greatly from the other pieces of information.

Question 6. How do you share the information in Touching Base with your teachers?

I send electronically to those I have email addresses for I make hard copies and distribute them to the teachers. - BOTH electronically and in hard copy at our BLT

I don't distribute the newsletter. This would not be part of my job.

(I distribute ideas to other schools not in CRF)

As LEA I make sure that the principals have copies at the principals meetings and that the coaches have copies.

I don't distribute the newsletter (as the LEA, I don't distribute but I know that one of our schools does distribute via e-mail)

instead, in my role as the curriculum coordinator, I have shared items during administrative meetings and the information is shared beyond that.

I forward the classroom application information to all principals and instructional coaches to use across the district.

I send Touching Base electronically to teachers, and we highlight and/or discuss information during grade level meetings and BLT meetings.

I don't distribute the newsletter-someone else does.

The secretary made copies and posted or distributed them while we were receiving them directly through email. Since we now access them online, the teachers have access to them that way, also.

Teachers have access to the newsletter on the CDE site.

Question 7. What additional news would you like to see in Touching Base this next year?

More data summaries for CRF as a whole, regions, and highlighted schools. (Data)

More updated data - summary reports of all CRF Schools, showing growth, etc. (Data) (LS)

Parent tips that could be used in a school newsletter (ParentT)

I think Touching Base is a very effective way to communicate. I can't think of any additions. (P)

Sustaining beyond year 4. (Sustain)

Continued PD and updates on changes, requirements, etc. A coaching corner would be nice with additional info from RC's. (Coaching)

Research on Classroom sizes (LS) (Research)

Anything that would be helpful to know about what is happening !!! (Updates)

Templates that other systems use to manage and review data. (LS) (Data)

I think Touching Base is very thorough. I cannot think at this time what I would want added. (P)
(Touching Base)

I would like to see information pointing us to research in reading that is new or current. (Research)

I feel that all four topics are equally important to the success and sustainability of Reading Reform at schools. They should share equal coverage. (Updates) (Sustain)

We could benefit from more specific data around CRF schools which are achieving outstanding results with various subgroups (i.e. ELL). Also, longitudinal data for CRF schools would be helpful (using the recently established process established by Ken Turner's TAP group) along with some conversation regarding potential systemic processes that contributed to those longitudinal results. (Data)

Researched-based information about how children learn to read, strategies & first best practice ideas for all teachers. (Research)

I always like to hear about successes or different ways of doing things. Scheduling ideas; creative ways of getting additional teaching with kids. (LS)

Other schools ideas, programs, etc. (LS)

I like the method. I am very much into technology and prefer technological communication methods. I like the reminders by email for upcoming events. (Techno)

Information about other districts. (LS)

I feel touching base is fine the way it is. (P)

I would like to see strategy information for providing extra practice in the 5 components. I would also like to hear site stories of success with CRF implementation. (LS)

What's working in other school and what other schools are doing to see results—intervention ideas, resources, etc. (LS)

The current news is very useful...Occasionally there have been links to useful information via the internet... I love those! (Techno)

I would like to see more links to websites promoting best SBRR information: links for professionals, links for parents providing them with useful information about reading and how they can support their children, and links for children to explore reading games/activities electronically. (ParentT) (LS)

Reminders on what to put in BoE. News on what type of interventions are successful for other schools. (LS)

I like the information in Touching Base and being able to go back and archive information, ie, important dates, online class information, etc. (Updates)

Information about new research, or refinements in practice; funding issues. (Research)

Question 8. Additional comments

The one thing that I would really like to see is that registration for the CCRA's change. It's like a mad rush to get the day we want. We are on a 4 day school week and have Friday's off. Friday's are really the only day that work for us to attend CCRA's because we only have 8 subs for our whole district and would never be able to cover all our classes if we had to go on a Wednesday or Thursday. It would be great if CRF would just assign those 4 day week schools to Friday. Thanks for asking and listening. (Registration for events)

Webinars have been very effective this year. For those of us in outlying areas it is so much easier than travelling to a location to receive the information. (P) (Webinars)

Overall, communications are timely and effective. I would appreciate continuing reminders on reports that are due. (P)

I actually think the communication has been exceptional. (P)

I would like to see the information accurate the first time we receive it. Seems there have been a number of recalls and changes at the last minute. Consistency and reliability are important to me when I have to share with other staff who are counting on me knowing what is happening. (N) (I)

I would request that the RC send me copies of their site visit schedules and send emails as soon as they know there is a change in there schedule. I would also request that Sopris Coaches send me copies of all communication with the schools under this LEA. (I)

I have felt more connected through the use of the webinars this year. They are instructional and interactive. (P) (Webinars)

I believe the communication through CRF has been great. Thanks. I know how much time it takes to put out Touching Base, but it is so helpful! I also believe that it is the best thing for teachers. I don't have the time as a principal or LEA to frequently put out a newsletter specifically about CRF activities. So, when I send this newsletter out to everyone on the staff, it keeps us all informed – even secretaries, librarians, custodians, nurses, etc. Thanks! (P) (Touching Base)

The information is always useful to a principal. Thank you. (P)

I believe the emails and Touching Base are effective; sometimes the information changes, however, and we aren't given much advance notice. When we are told deadlines, they don't always happen in that time frame. Emails are sent out and sometimes taken back when mistakes are made, which gives people the impression that there is miscommunication taking place. I have been very pleased with your response to questions I have had. You answer promptly and if you don't know, you tell me that but continue to search for the answer. One feature I would like to

see is some kind of blog where we could communicate with other Reading First schools. When we are struggling with something or trying a new intervention, for example, it would be great to be able to send out an inquiry and have other coaches, teachers or LEAs give us input. It would make us more of a learning community rather than separate schools sharing a grant. (P) (N) (I) (Techno)

Thanks for all of your help. (P)

I believe that CRF has done a great job of soliciting opinions and responding to concerns from the field. I appreciate your work and I believe that I understand many of your obstacles and constraints. Thanks! (P)

Ideas for sustainability, support that might be in place to do that, expectations beyond funding. (Sustain)

I feel TB is informative as well as comprehensive. I don't have any suggestions at this time. There are no concerns. (P) (Touching Base)

I'd like information on schools that are getting fabulous results and opportunities to dialogue with those principals. (LS)

Overall, communication has been very good with CRF. (P)

For the most part communications are adequate concerning CRF, newsletters and e-mails are helpful. The webinars are somewhat helpful but have taken place during the lunch hour at our schools, making it difficult to have the Principal participate since they have no AP's and have to do cafeteria or recess duty during the middle of the day. In addition, while the data webs are somewhat helpful, they are much too long and complicated in my opinion. In addition, there does not seem to be a consistent message between the consultant coaches who visit the schools and CDE or the LEA who rarely has contact with the one who visits my 3 schools. (P) (N) (I) (Webinars)

I like the webinars – they provide about the same opportunity as having to drive 12 hours, pay for lodging, meals, etc. for those of us not in close proximity to Denver. (P) (Webinars)

Della, I think Reading First does a very good job with communication. Webinars still need to be perfected. They don't seem to flow very smoothly, but they make it so much easier than having several meetings now and then. (P) (N) (I) (Webinars)

Della, we appreciate your efforts to maintain communication, and have had no major complaints. (We are anxious to hear final funding amounts so that we can resolve budget issues and make staffing decisions.) (P)