

Plain Talk Monthly Meeting Notes

Wed., March 11, 2009

1:30-3:30 p.m., L&I Building

A facilitated brainstorm of about 40 Plain Talk agency leads.

Facilitator, Kris Rietmann, GMAP

2009 Plain Talk Priorities – Brainstorming Workshop

Part 1: Icebreaker/Group Activity:

Think of, in 25 words or less, the impact Plain Talk has had on **your** work in state government. **Here are some of the responses** from Plain Talk agency leads around the room:

- *It's made me provide better customer service.*
- *I'm more aware of my readers.*
- *It's caused our organization to think differently about communication.*
- *People don't think I'm crazy anymore (when I bring up plain language).*
- *I think differently about communication.*
- *It's made me think of the "outside" point of view.*
- *It's made me more aware of who I am writing for.*
- *Plain Talk is my work. And it makes it easy.*
- *It's part of my job.*
- *It has challenged me to engage customers - it has made a difference.*
- *We've been able to apply these principles to our web site. It has helped us organize our content and our terms. It pours over from the print side.*
- *It helps us focus on what the message is.*
- *Outside customers love it.*
- *It has made me very aware of how powerful language is. It can change behavior – and it has a huge affect on the way we – in government – are perceived by the public.*
- *I can communicate more effectively – and I have more confidence in my ability to advocate (for plain language at my agency).*

- *Everyone knows about Plain Talk now so people understand what I'm talking about.*
- *It has made me more aware of my own writing. I want to use it. At (my agency), it's not institutionalized, but people know about and know they're supposed to be incorporating into (their work), though GMAP has taken over (their focus). But there is more penetration and I've gained confidence from coming to these meetings.*
- *It's been very encouraging because I can see how I am able to help - especially small business owners, who thank me because they can understand (their paperwork/web pages) and can understand the rules. It's unusual to have someone say thank you.*
- *Plain Talk works differently in (every group), but there is increasing awareness (that what it can do) that is measurable and strategic. I've gone from being the resident grammarian, because people understand now that I can help them change behavior. I'm taken more seriously.*
- *An auditor from my program is actually coming to a Plain Talk training tomorrow! They "see" it now.*
- *It's given me additional authority to convince the administrator of the value of writing and speaking in clear English.*
- *There is more interest and inspiration for speaking for impact and accuracy.*
- *I like the title "Plain Talk" because I never knew what (to call it when she spoke with others about plain language – and now people get it right away). People are really affected by seeing the before-and- afters.*
- *It has helped me redesign (my agency's) web site.*
- *In licensing (matters) ... letters, etc., it has streamlined our processes because there are fewer questions (from customers) and things move more quickly. I design forms. So now I can say "we need to change this because of our Plain Talk initiative."*
- *I use Plain Talk in our newsletter and our work with DSHS. And we send out quite a few letters. (It helps when there are) different levels of English speaking.*
- *Plain Talk just feels better - and it is useful in the technology area. It helps me convey technical information more clearly. It forces you to crystallize your own thoughts and convey them in a way that that is easier to understand.*

Part 2: Each participant wrote down as many comments as they could on these four questions. Group leaders then read the comments to the entire group.

1. What strategic objectives are you trying to achieve with Plain Talk?
2. What are our strengths?
3. What are our weaknesses?
4. How would you improve Plain Talk?

The following is a summary of some of the comments heard during the exercise. The full summary of this exercise will be captured in the spreadsheet prepared by Dana & Kris.

First Group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Streamline, save time and money, increase compliance, create better call centers, reduce mail costs, have better communication with customers and staff, reduce costs, provide better information, reduce processing time, provide better information, make customer interactions more efficient, spend time wisely, improve morale and professional image, provide better customer service, think smarter, question why we do things.
2. **Our strengths:** The Governor's order, good coordination, commitment, sharing of information, positive attitude, know customers and use feedback to improve, executive support, reduced "silos."
3. **Our weaknesses:** Need more direction from a central point of authority, need to differentiate between different (types of?) efforts, top management not skilled or open, web teams not as involved as they should be, inconsistent application, agencies are too huge, lack of resources, dollars and time. Not all find value in it. Needs more prioritization.
4. **How we could improve:** Set quarterly performance goals, provide training for all staff, apply across the board, improve measures of success, include "information services" and executive level, pool resources for user testing, set agency standards, continue to train, not-training is not an option, include RCWs and WACs in the initiative.

Second Group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Engage the public in decision-making, help people understand actions, reduce hand-holding and lower costs, make it easier for customer to pay taxes, better organize web navigation and content so it can be understood better.
2. **Our strengths:** Standards help us focus and are clear and concise. We have standards to reference. Staff understands the Plain Talk benefit. The support of executive leadership, large numbers of trained staffed.

3. **Our weaknesses:** PT Training doesn't improve writing skills, it doesn't help agencies without form letters or that don't interact with customers, technical folks don't think it works, people think we're talking down to them, not having enough standards and guidance, it's seen as an extra step, rather than the basic building blocks, people get trained but not all feel competent.
4. **How we could improve:** We need to teach people to not write to themselves, hold fewer meetings, get more mid-level managers on board and have them make it apply to everyone, leverage successes to new areas, link to federal and local efforts, help staff understand that PT can be learned. Allow more time for PT workshops.

Third Group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Cheaper operations, fewer citizens in litigation, more citizens with a voice, reduced follow-up letters and documents, clearer messages, instructions so people know what to do, accurate data reporting from the regulated community.
2. **Our strengths:** It's a great idea whose time has come, dedicated leads, usability testing, dedicated employees who value language, training, having a PT point person for each agency, executive management support, the culture change.
3. **Our weaknesses:** It's not seen as a way to solve business problems at the executive level, it's sometimes an "add-on," some people only use it to do over forms, some staff don't think it applies to their work, no good measures to track success.
4. **How we can improve:** Commit a few part-time FTEs to the initiative, create a strong marketing campaign, create a bank of resources, share common resources, create a "checking for Plain Talk" application, develop a place to receive and store customer comments, and create a more strategic approach.

Fourth group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Customer happiness, less confusion, public understanding, explain purpose and reason behind actions govt. takes.
2. **Our strengths:** Technical help is available at my desk. Lot of resources. Lots of cooperation. The web site and (our agency's employee newsletter. Good penetration of employees who take the class. The mandate. Focus on broad base of customers.
3. **Our weaknesses:** Employees ask: How does it relate to me? No time. No real central of Plain Talk. No enforcement. Some see as extra work and just want to get out of it by using excuses like no time.
4. **How we could improve:** Develop a guide to words to avoid. Quarterly meetings (instead of monthly). Bring up Plain Talk at a Cabinet meeting. Provide group training. Awards. Focus groups with actual customers. Make it part of the budget process. Create a glossary of words/statements frequently used – in plain language.

Fifth Group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Increase efficiencies. Be better understood by those who lead us. Easily understood documents. Better custom service. Streamlined service. Customers know how to get help. Easier to comply with rules. Saving lives. Improving public trust. Easier for customer to give us what we need.
2. **Our strengths:** It's the right thing to do. Gov. Executive Order. Gov. Executive Order. Committees. Support. We have proficient and dedicated communicators. (It is a) grassroots (movement). Meetings and trainings are good resources. Executive support. Commitment from the workforce. Advocacy from the top.
3. **Our weaknesses:** (We're in a culture of) texting and hosting. Poor writing foundation among (state employees). Lack of ground-level support. Lack of resources among supporters. Not enough accountability or buy-in. Breakdown in relaying common objectives. Implementation is better in some agencies. Not enough organization and clear plan statewide. Underutilizing the internet.
4. **How we could improve:** Mandate Plain Talk training for all. More measurable results. Have a central review process for major documents. Make role of PT coordinate part of job description. Plan with stakeholders. More time commitment. Stronger agency policies. Mentor those without the clout. Keep the web site fresh with ideas.

Sixth Group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Get information to citizens. Better access. Improve writing. Reduce printing costs. Provide access to inform. Improve. Practice continuously.
2. **Our strengths:** Reduce overall (?), search engine opportunities, Agency purpose. A forum that allows us to learn from others (in monthly meetings).
3. **Our weaknesses:** We may not censor ourselves enough. Lack of initiative by plain talk coordinators. E-mails from higher executives/managers. Hard to get away from bureaucratise.
4. **How we could improve:** Create a ListServ for PT leads, learn how to gently guide "authors" to improve. Get more involvement by making it more fun with contests and (more activities). Question the usefulness of some documents. Practice what we preach. Create one centralized training program; we don't have to reinvent the wheel. Reach everyone. Self-promote. Don't expect the web to (?). Increase reader feedback.

Seventh Group

1. **Our strategic objectives:** Improve customer service. Save money. Save time. Training on contract writing. Increased visibility. Helping citizens get to the right services. Changing the culture. Discontinuing the need for repeat explanations. Less paper

2. **Our strengths:** We understand the value of Plain Talk. There is a willingness and passion. Focus on service. Most (involved in PT?) have excellent English skills. Improvement in public perception. Word is spreading. We have eliminated and consolidated many forms.
3. **Our weaknesses:** Lack of writing skills, time and resources. It needs to be mandatory. We need to change (it so Plain Talk applies to) contracts, WACs and RCWs. Unwillingness (in agencies) to allow change.
4. **How we could improve:** Require annual employee reviews to include Plain Talk skills. More online training. More sharing of expertise. Create more and better success measures. Building internal employee performance expectations. Hold workshops. Have more agency trainings.

Part 3: The group categorized the comments on the wall – then prioritized them using a color-coding system.

- This portion of the exercise will be captured in the summary spreadsheet prepared by Dana & Kris.

Part 4: Next steps:

- Dana and Kris will collect the data and summarize it.
- Dana will distribute the notes.
- At the April meeting, we'll use the information to prompt committee discussions and outline a focused action plan for 2009-2010.

Committee members were encouraged to contact Dana or Kris about joining one of the Plain Talk committees. The time commitment is 2-3 hours per month.

- Marketing
- Website
- Online training
- 2009 Plain Talk Conference, Olympia
- Usability

Next meeting:

Wed., April 8th

1:30 – 3:30 p.m.

L&I Building, Room S118

Need directions? www.Lni.wa.gov

Questions? Contact

[Dana Botka](#), 902-5408 or [Kris Rietmann](#), at 902-0401