COMMUNICATORS' HANDBOOK

4 THE GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATORS' TOOLKIT

The Government Communicators' Toolkit shares with government communicators mechanisms for dealing with different functions expected of them. It outlines the policy positions relating to their work and provides guidance on how to approach certain functions.

4.1. Government communication as a co-ordinated function

The Communication Task Team (Comtask) that was set up by the Cabinet in 1995 to investigate and make recommendations about government communication, revealed as part of its findings that 'government lacks central co-ordination of messaging and adequate planning of information campaigns'.

As a result of Comtask's findings and recommendations, government established the GCIS as a structure within which all government communication and information would be co-ordinated. The GCIS was given the mandate to introduce a system that is comprehensive, integrated, streamlined and structured for delivery.

Since its birth in May 1998, the GCIS has put in place systems to co-ordinate and plan the communication work of government. Among these is the Extranet, which serves as a calendar of events designed to enable government communicators to share

their plans for public activities and programmes. This system enables communicators to take advantage of the opportunities created by other departments for bilateral work, to be more sensitive to the environment within which information is released and approaches taken, and to be more proactive in setting the government agenda.

Additional to this is a series of forums for government communicators at national, provincial and local level, designed to ensure collective planning and strategising around communication in government.

The Government Communicators' Forum, which is convened quarterly by the GCIS, provides a platform for government communicators to plan and identify communication opportunities across all spheres and sectors of government through substantive discussions and joint planning to fulfil the Government's commitment to accelerate service delivery.

In addition, Communication Clusters provide a platform for government communicators to jointly plan and collectively implement government communication programmes. These Communication Clusters are designed in the same manner as the Cabinet Clusters and thereby allow for communication programmes to be developed on the basis of concrete
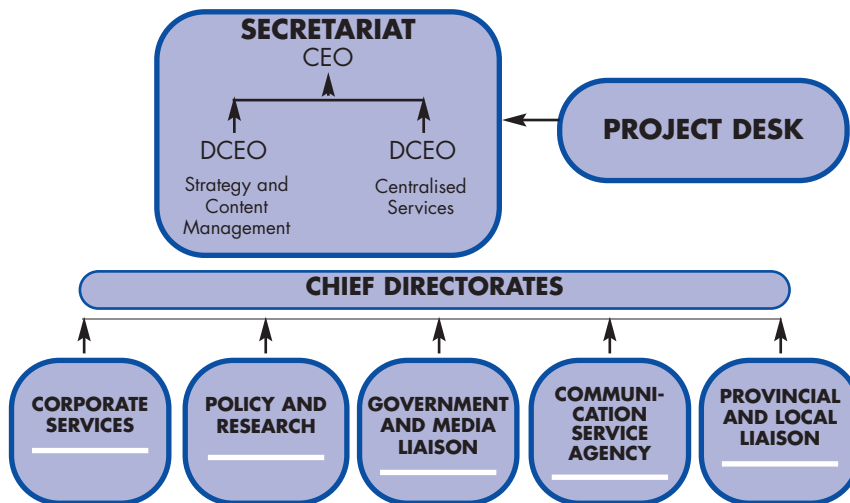
plans that emanate from the Cabinet. *BuaNews* Online is an electronic government publication that provides stories on a daily basis covering activities of government and other sectors of society to mainly community media across the country.

The Chief Executive Officer of the GCIS sits in Cabinet and conducts Post-Cabinet Briefings to communicate the decisions taken by the Government on a number of policy matters.

The position adopted by Cabinet on all matters of public interest are communicated not only through the regular statements issued after each Cabinet meeting but also disseminated by GCIS more widely through *Bua Briefs*, including to communicators.

Accordingly, Communication Clusters, the GCF, *BuaNews* Online, Post-Cabinet Briefings, *Bua Briefs* and Parliamentary Briefing Weeks help enhance co-ordinated communication of government messages and information.

The Structure of the GCIS

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              SECRETARIAT
                 CEO

      DCEO              DCEO           ←   PROJECT DESK
   Strategy and      Centralised
     Content          Services
   Management

              CHIEF DIRECTORATES

CORPORATE   POLICY AND   GOVERNMENT   COMMUNI-    PROVINCIAL
 SERVICES    RESEARCH     AND MEDIA    CATION     AND LOCAL
                          LIAISON      SERVICE     LIAISON
                                       AGENCY
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- Corporate Services is in charge of the human resource needs of the organisation. This section is responsie for the overall leadership and management of the activities, personnel and budget of the two Directorates: Human Resources and Training Services, and the Subdirectorates: Internal Communication, Human Resource Management, and Information Centre.
  Tel: (012) 314 2402.

- Government and Media Liaison (G&ML) co-ordinates and facilitates the development and implementation of communication strategies. It manages and strengthens the relationship between government and the media, and convenes all the co-ordination forums aimed at promoting the integration of government communication. G&ML is responsible for the overall

COMMUNICATORS' HANDBOOK

COMMUNICATORS' HANDBOOK

leadership and management of the activities, personnel and budget of the three Directorates: National Liaison, International and Media Liaison, and News Service *BuaNews Online*, as well as the Communication Centre, Parliamentary Office and Parliamentary Resource Centre.
Tel: (012) 314 2108.

- Policy and Research is responsible for analysing the impact of government policy from a communication perspective as well as research into the communication environment within which government operates. This section also facilitates research into the communication needs of other government departments on request. It is responsible for the overall leadership and management of the activities, personnel and budget of the two Directorates: Policy Development and Research.
Tel: (012) 314 2176.

- The Communication Service Agency (CSA) is responsible for the content development and production of government information products; co-ordinating bulk-buying of advertising and marketing space for government; and managing the video, photography and radio units of the GCIS. The CSA is responsible for the overall leadership and management of the activities, personnel and budget of the three Directorates: Content Development, Product Development, Marketing, Advertising and Distribution (MAD),

as well as the Subdirectorate: Support Services.
Tel: (012) 314 2297.

- Provincial and Local Liaison (PLL) is responsible for the co-ordination and facilitation of all Development Communication work aimed at providing government information and services to citizens of South Africa to better their lives and promote development. One of the leading approaches in providing such useful information and services is through the establishment of Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs), that are being rolled out in especially rural and under-serviced areas. PLL is responsible for the overall leadership and management of the activities, personnel and budget of the three Directorates: PLL Administration, Institutional Development, and Local Liaison and Information Management (LLIM). The nine regional and 85 district-based GCIS offices are also co-ordinated through PLL.
Tel: (012) 314 2426.

- The GCIS Project Desk assists government departments with specific campaigns and events. It develops a Government Communication Programme (GCP) and constitutes project teams in line with the imperatives of the GCP. It receives and processes cross-cutting communication projects/campaigns requests for assistance from other government departments on behalf of the GCIS. These requests for assistance relate to strategising for communication.
Tel: (012) 314 2293.

- Information Management and Technology is responsible for the efficient and effective utilisation of information and information technology by the GCIS in the execution by GCIS of its functions. The section is responsible for the overall leadership and management of the activities, personnel and budget of the four subprogrammes: Network and Server Support; Regional Support and Training; Systems Development, and Electronic Information Resources. Tel: (012) 314 2187.

4.2. Government Communication Strategy (GCS)
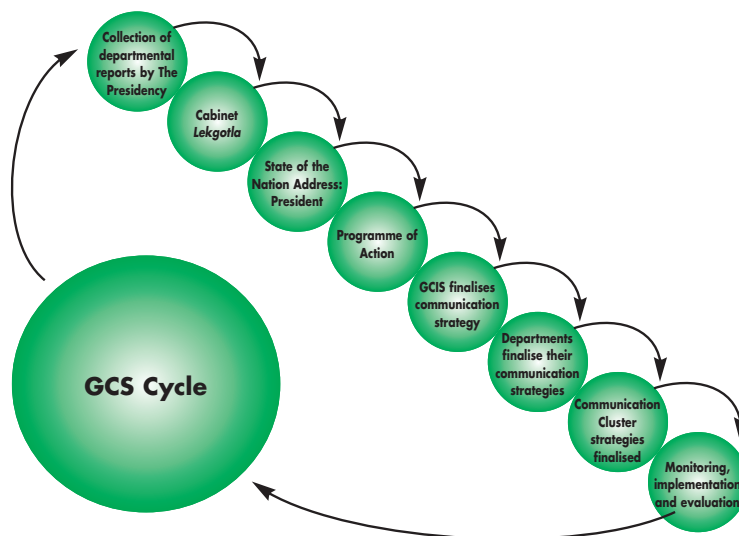
The GCS sets the framework for government communication each year. Taking serious account of their key programmes, departments are expected to follow this framework in determining their communication strategies and plans. The GCIS is mandated to monitor progress in the implementation of the GCS.

Towards the end of each calendar year, departmental reports are consolidated for an input into the *Lekgotla*.

The Cabinet *Lekgotla* deliberates on the broad programme and strategic priorities of government. The President announces the Government's Programme of Action in the SoNA at the beginning of each calendar year. On the basis of this Programme, the GCIS finalises the GCS.

At this point, the GCIS then presents the GCS to the GCF with the central government message, which then guides the work of a government communicator for that particular year.

Heads of Communication (HoCs) are expected to submit to the GCIS,

COMMUNICATORS' HANDBOOK

departmental communication strategies and programmes that are developed in line with the overall GCS within two weeks of Cabinet approval.

4.3. Generic framework for developing a communication strategy – a process in outline

Why strategise for communication?

A thousand voices speaking without a common message and single purpose will in the end just make an indistinct noise that few will hear.

We must, therefore, speak with a shared purpose and clarity of message. Our actions must be informed by an understanding of the environment we are working in, of who we are trying to reach, what they are thinking, and how they are best reached.

In other words, we must strategise for communication, translating our ideas into a concrete Programme of Action that promotes our objectives.

The strategising process

There are many ways of approaching this challenge. What follows is a process that has emerged out of the GCIS' own experience in strategising for communication. It is formulated in nine steps. But this is not a mechanical process that yields automatic results. It needs hard work and lots of thought.

These steps are the elements of

developing strategy for communication and implementing it. Each step is of critical importance and is interlinked. But there is a logical order. We need, early on, to give critical attention to two elements – Objective and Message – to ensure that our work will not be undermined.

Strategising is about how to achieve objectives but if we are unclear about our objective or get it wrong, then all the rest will be of little or no value. We also need to correctly define what we want to say.

The communication strategising process entails the following core elements: Background; Objectives; Environment; Communication Challenges; Messages and Themes; Messengers; Audiences and Channels; Types of Event; A Phased Communication Programme; Structures and Processes, and Communication Strategy Document and Action Plan.

• **Background**

Outlines what has led to the need for the communication strategy to ensure that we are on the right track.

• **Objectives**

Clarify intended outcomes and purpose of the campaign. It may be to educate, reassure people, receive feedback about a departmental programme, change a perception, etc.

• **Environment**

This will define the terrain and environment in which you choose to communicate. It should deal with issues

like the public mood, the media agenda, concerns and attitudes of varying sectors and forces, potential for improving the communication environment, etc.

It is critical to understand the environment before implementing the communication strategy. In fact, the exercise of scanning the environment contributes greatly to the effective development of a communication programme. Such a scan may require a number of areas not clearly understood by the public and therefore needs further research.

- **Communication challenges**

Having considered broad objectives in the context of a defined environment will lead you to identify specific communication challenges which have to be met successfully in order to achieve the objectives.

Once challenges are clarified, it will be possible to know exactly what it is we must communicate and how that should be done.

- **Messages and themes**

It is critical to indicate the themes and concepts that are associated with the communication effort being undertaken. A distinction can be drawn between core themes and sub-themes.

Once this has been done effectively, it will be possible to formulate a core message.

When adopting a core message it is critical to integrate it with the

Government's core message for the year. For instance, the 2004/05 message is: *A people united to build a better South Africa and a better world.*

The Government's core message is particularly important because it communicates the central message adopted by the Cabinet in the GCS.

- **Messengers, audience and Channels**

A campaign should always have its own voice. Who speaks for it? To whom? And in what ways? Through which channels?

- **Phased communication Programme**

There are two parts here: phasing of a campaign and the broad outline of a communication programme.

Very rarely is there just one stage to a campaign. One may move from a first phase of education and awareness, to a second of mobilising for action. Each phase has its different needs and challenges.

- **Structures and processes**

Implementing the communication strategy requires consultation with various structures. It has to be well articulated who the partners in the programme are and what their role will be.

- **Communication Strategy Document and Action Plan**

A well-written Communication Strategy

COMMUNICATORS' HANDBOOK

Document is a critical instrument for a good campaign.

The document will be the guide for all future action, the standard against which the success or failure of communication is measured, and also the most critical means for keeping the campaign on track.

It needs to be clear and concise, and well-written in a form that is easily understood and persuasive, not as a series of bullet-points but as a logical presentation of the thinking behind the strategising session, crisply articulating the core message and the themes.

To put into practice the ideas resulting from strategising requires an Action Plan that spells out in detail what is to be done for each event in the programme; who is to do it; what its specific targets and objectives are, budgets, and so on. This will also serve as an instrument of strategic management and co-ordination to make sure the objectives are met.

An Action Plan is best set out in a table format (see example below). A critical part of the Action Plan is to identify other supporting plans needed, for example:

- A media liaison strategy consisting of a detailed plan of interviews, press briefings, media/journalists to be targeted, opinion pieces, etc. Most importantly, a statement of key messages, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Answers, should be developed for use by communicators and writers, especially for campaigns whose objectives are to educate and inform, and have a medium term to long term duration. There is a need for a positioning strategy something related to the Objective, Challenges and Message.

Element/Tasks	Date	Responsibility	Remarks
Phase 1:			
Phase 2:			
Phase 3:			

An example of a table format to develop an Action Plan for a communication strategy

- A distribution strategy citing a detailed plan on how the various products/services will be disseminated to the identified target audiences.

4.4. Politics and a government communicator

Case Study: Take the dilemmas of Mike McCurry, former United States President Bill Clinton's spin-doctor. 'He had a masterful tact, a profound understanding of the ebb and flow of the fungible commodity called news. He would deflect questions with artistic ease, sugar-coating the messes into which the Clintonites most often found themselves. While he at times relied on sometimes deceiving and scolding some reporters as a tactic, he never lost sight of the need to establish relations with them. He understood one thing, that many of the messages relating to issues from policy to scandals about campaign fundraising, reporters formed the core of mediators of messages that would flow from the White House. His changing tactics were always based on an understanding of where Americans were in relation to each story. If there was fatigue on the side of the citizenry in regard to the campaign funding story for instance, he would adopt a hard line to those reporting. But his job entailed a persistent dilemma, as he stood squarely at the intersection of news and propaganda, in the white-hot glare of the media spotlight, the buffer between self-serving administration officials and a cynical pack of reporters. At all times he was guided by what he believed were his fundamental principles; telling the truth, giving citizens a sense of the White House, and protecting the President. Like all communicators he understood that the complexity of his job was the fact that every syllable he uttered was transcribed by news agencies. In the same manner, every communicator must learn the skill of never to compromise the truth, but tiptoe up to the line separating flackery from falsehood without crossing it.' (Kurtz, H: Spin Cycle: 1998)

If there is one area of governance which fully represents the political and administrative interface and dilemmas, it is the task of communication. The communicator straddles the delicate and precarious balance of political and administrative operations, harmonises the varying emphasis of these two Siamese fraternities to emerge with messages which reflect their unity of purpose. It is usually a government communicator who must deal with packaging messages in a manner which harmonises the administrative and political arms of government. This difficulty of the administrative and political interface is represented by individual Ministers on the one hand, and the Departmental Heads on the other.

Indirectly, the communicator is likely to be embroiled in party political expressions as he/she communicates policy positions most of which, if not all, are associated with a ruling party. In this way a government communicator stands in conflict with opposition parties. It is this political trajectory that poses a great challenge for a government communicator.

COMMUNICATORS' HANDBOOK