



United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Enhancing APHIS Internal Communications



Message from the APHIS Administrator



Throughout my career, I have always believed in the importance of putting people first. The most effective workplaces are those that cultivate personal connections and treat employees as the cornerstone of the organization's success.

Such workplaces hold good internal communications at their core. Managers actively seek out and listen to employee opinions, and employees have regular interaction with and access to senior leaders. Employees have a clear picture of where the organization is going, what the mission is, and how their work contributes to those goals. Most importantly, they trust their leadership and feel valued, supported, and understood. In addition to good vertical communication, employees in such organizations communicate effectively with their peers across unit boundaries. This enhances efficiency, avoids duplication or confusion, and most important, ensures that policies and messaging are consistent.

This is the kind of workplace I want for all of us here at APHIS. While our Agency continues to do excellent work, including a lot of communication, there are areas where this aspect of our work life can be improved. Better internal communications can only enhance our fulfillment of the APHIS mission, and our service to our external stakeholders.

It's been said that "the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." With a workforce as large and widely dispersed as ours, it's all too easy for APHIS to fall into this trap—where there's either a lot of information going out that never reaches the employees who need it or, equally troublesome, no information going out at all.

Creating and maintaining effective internal communications does not happen accidentally. Good communication within an organization takes dedication, thoughtful planning, and purposeful action over time. And these efforts must begin with the organization's leadership.

With this in mind, the APHIS Management Team (AMT), in consultation with the Agency's management support units, has come up with a starting point—a framework—for how the Agency can take a more coordinated, strategic approach to internal communications. I encourage you to read through the framework and embrace APHIS' guiding principles for internal communications. Then, I hope you will discuss your thoughts and ideas with your supervisor, as well as your program's leadership. And please take full advantage of the communications tools—like the APHIS portal and especially the "Join the Conversation" blog—to give me, Associate Administrator Kevin Shea, and the AMT your feedback and observations.

I am very pleased to issue this plan for enhancing internal communications in APHIS early in my tenure as Administrator. My predecessor, Cindy Smith, began the effort that would ultimately lead to this framework several years ago when she traveled to APHIS' headquarters, regional offices, and laboratory facilities for listening sessions with employees. I share Cindy's deep appreciation for employees and their work, and hope this framework provides additional resources and support to you.

I know each of us is committed to making APHIS even better, even more effective, than we already are. Ultimately, by enhancing the way we do business with each other, we better position ourselves to accomplish what we're here to do: help our customers, help our colleagues, and keep agriculture healthy and strong.

Dr. Gregory Parham
APHIS Administrator

Introduction

This framework for coordinating and enhancing internal communications in APHIS arose from several different starting points.

The first was former Administrator Cindy Smith's visits to APHIS' headquarters, regional hub offices, and laboratory facilities in the summer of 2009. During listening sessions at each of these locations, the Administrator heard employees express a range of opinions about the Agency, from how clear communication from management is critical to supporting their success; to how some felt frustrated by lack of involvement in Agency decisions and inability to communicate "up the chain" to senior leaders in the Agency; to feelings of being inundated and overloaded by email messages regarding Agency news, requirements, policies, and other administrative information.

The second starting point shaping this framework was the employee feedback collected as part of USDA's management review of agencies in the Marketing and Regulatory Programs mission area. This management review, conducted in support of Secretary Vilsack's initiative to transform the culture of USDA and make the Department a model employer and service provider, gave employees the opportunity to share their experiences and observations working for APHIS, including their ideas for improving their workplaces and the Agency as a whole. By and large, the APHIS employees who contributed to the management review want to see more meaningful in-person interaction with their supervisors and Agency senior leaders. Employees also said they want to be heard in the policy deliberation process. And they want to see improvements made to internal communications that deliver more useful and timely information regarding APHIS' decisions, as well as new ways of engaging senior leaders in dialog.

The final starting point for the framework was APHIS' goal of increasing its engagement with all stakeholders as it carries out operations and develops new policies and regulations. As part of ongoing efforts to develop a coordinated Agency approach to stakeholder engagement, APHIS' Legislative and Public Affairs (LPA) and Policy and Program Development (PPD) surveyed Agency employees regarding what tools and support they need to engage stakeholders and represent APHIS well in doing so. Employee responses gleaned through the survey, as well as focus group sessions, returned time and again to internal communications: understanding how APHIS makes decisions, when, why, and with what information. In addition, employees want the opportunity to learn more about each step in the process prior to APHIS announcing information or decisions so that, when called on, they are better able to answer questions and explain the Agency's actions to stakeholders.

Employee feedback from listening sessions, USDA's management review, and stakeholder engagement surveys showed a consistent theme—APHIS can do better when it comes to internal communications.

What Do APHIS Employees Want?

- Participation in APHIS policy deliberation process
- More communication with the Agency's senior leaders
- Less email, more in-person interaction
- Better understanding of the "how, when, and why" of APHIS decisions

Changes for a Better APHIS



In response to the issues raised about APHIS' internal communications, the Agency has taken several actions to address employee feedback and ideas and improve the delivery of important information to employees.

Reviewed current initiatives. The AMT asked the Agency's Program Leaders Group (PLG) to assess internal communications initiatives underway in APHIS and make suggestions for improvements. The PLG's review contributed key information to APHIS' framework for internal communications.

The review found that APHIS programs are utilizing a number of effective approaches to internal communications, such as regular Deputy Administrator teleconference calls with employees, in-person meetings, regular email messages, newsletters, SharePoint sites, and easily accessible, informational voicemail messages recorded weekly for employees.

However, the PLG also found that, for some employees, the lack of coordination between the programs' various communications tactics contributes to their sense of being "bombarded" by information, particularly when these tactics are coupled with Department- and Agency-level communications from the Secretary and his staff, the APHIS Administrator, the APHIS Chief Information Officer, and others. The PLG's assessment also concluded that the current state of internal communications causes some employees, in an effort to prioritize this constant stream of information, to focus almost exclusively on messages coming from their respective Deputy Administrator, Regional Director, and direct manager and supervisor. This is causing critical information from the APHIS Administrator

and above to go unnoticed by employees, resulting in a disconnect with senior leaders and strong desire to be more involved in, and knowledgeable about, Agency deliberations and decisionmaking.

APHIS' framework for internal communications seeks to provide a flexible way of addressing all of these stressors on the success of information sharing within the Agency.

Created APHIS Web portal. In 2010, APHIS developed and launched a new Web portal for Agency employees designed specifically to address employee feedback on internal communications. The APHIS portal site is helping to reduce the number of emails filling employee inboxes by cataloging key Agency and Department information in one location. It also provides a one-time login for employees to other Web-based sites like GovTrip and WebTA.

And, most importantly, the APHIS portal includes a dedicated space for the APHIS Administrator's Office to share real-time information and insights with Agency employees. The "Join the Conversation" blog affords a unique opportunity for these leaders to share information about themselves and their jobs, as well as what Departmental leaders are asking of them, directly with employees. In turn, employees can offer instantaneous feedback and ideas, or ask questions, creating constant dialog, benefitting both senior leaders and employees as each work on behalf of the Agency.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you! ...The [Administrative Process] Review, OA portal, and now 'Up the Chain' provide avenues for input from the levels that have been underrepresented in the past.... [These changes] have been good for APHIS as a whole and can be measured not only in terms of increased efficiency, but also in terms of increased morale."

~ Mary Wiggett, WS



The “Up the Chain” collaboration site on the APHIS portal functions much the same way: it creates a dedicated space for senior leaders to engage employees in deliberations and proposals for Agency policies and operational changes prior to decisions being made. It also gives employees the chance to share ideas and perspectives with all of the senior leaders in the Agency—not just those within their programs. In this way, both “Up the Chain” and “Join the Conversation” are helping APHIS better share information across programs and with all employees, whether they work in field, regional, or headquarters offices.

Enhanced administrative processes. Following her listening sessions with employees, then-Administrator Cindy Smith and the AMT reviewed and made improvements to several administrative processes singled out by employees as particularly confusing or time-consuming. As part of this Administrative Process Review (APR), the Agency’s Marketing and Regulatory Programs Business Services (MRPBS) unit partnered with PPD and LPA to incorporate employee feedback into the review and assessment of options under consideration for change and ensure that decisions and information were effectively conveyed to employees using a variety of communications approaches. As a result, the APR was seen as a very successful effort by employees, and the approach to hearing from and involving employees in such undertakings will continue for other Agency business and administrative endeavors going forward in the future.

Increased dialog and information sharing. The AMT has made increased dialog and information sharing with Agency employees one of its top areas of focus. For example, the AMT now summarizes the key information and messages from its monthly planning meeting and hosts a monthly teleconference call

“Good internal communication with employees...is an essential step in stakeholder engagement. ...Employees want to know why management makes the decisions they do, and they want to be a part of talking to or explaining these decisions to external customers.”

~ Beth Jones, LPA

shortly thereafter with all APHIS senior leaders regarding this information and messaging. Senior leaders in turn convey the information to their staff, who then do the same, on down the line over the course of a month. Simultaneously, at every point in the process, those receiving the information have the opportunity to raise questions and contribute feedback to their managers. This feedback is collected and conveyed back up the chain and, ultimately, provided to the AMT at the following month’s conference call with Agency senior leaders. The AMT then reviews the employee feedback and, when necessary, can consider issues further or seek to make adjustments to programs and policies.

Best Practice: Vary Your Tools

A key success of the APR was the broad range of mechanisms set up for direct employee feedback. The APR team took the time to engage employees through listening sessions, one-on-one interviews, surveys, onsite evaluations, feedback on the APHIS portal, and emails sent to the APHIS APR email address. Equally important, employees actively participated in these outlets, offering valuable ideas and input. The result was a meaningful dialogue—and creative, practical solutions for reducing employees’ administrative burdens.



Defined internal “rollout” process for stakeholder information.

Technology advances like SharePoint sites, Microsoft Office Communicator, and the APHIS Web portal create exciting new ways for Agency senior leaders to connect directly with employees, for teams to share information and get work done, and for employees to become more involved in Agency workings and decisions. The APHIS internal communications framework relies, in large part, on such technology and takes as a given that in the coming years, even more sophisticated tools will be available to help APHIS meet its internal communications goals. At the same time, this framework readily acknowledges that in APHIS, with a workforce that finds itself in remote locations across the country and around the world, not all employees have easy or reliable access to the connectivity required for them to take full advantage of these sites.

Therefore, another approach the framework encourages is one the Agency will use to communicate internally with employees in support of stakeholder engagement—the internal “rollout” of Agency decision and policy information prior to public announcement. As programs prepare to engage stakeholders in meaningful dialog about Agency decisions and policies, programs will conduct an internal rollout of related information to all of their employees. Rollouts will be tailored to the kind of engagement being proposed and rely on a blend of tactics, including teleconference calls, emails, SharePoint sites, and in-person meetings, to ensure critical information reaches all employees—regardless of their level of proficiency with information technology tools or ability to access Web-based resources.

The internal rollout of information to program employees is intended to build dialog between employees and program senior leaders. It offers a time to ask questions, address issues, and strengthen employee-senior leader relationships, all of which ultimately contributes to the success of APHIS’ engagement and partnerships with stakeholders.

“...if we are to pursue the goal of more productive, effective, and positive stakeholder engagement, it is paramount that senior leadership pledge solidarity to the spirit with which traditional and non-traditional stakeholder engagement will be conducted and managed.”
~ Vivian Miller, PPD

Best Practice: Reduce Email Traffic
MRPBS’ Financial Management Division (FMD) expanded the use of Microsoft Office Communicator to discuss “quick” issues. This has helped reduce the amount of email traffic on staff and encouraged communication on issues that might not get discussed if a phone call or in-person visit were the only other options. FMD’s use of instant messaging has also increased opportunities for dialogue between managers and their employees, as some staff members are more comfortable communicating with management using this method.



Developed plan for creating Cultural

Transformation in APHIS. APHIS’ Cultural Transformation Action Plan, available on the APHIS portal, builds upon the Department’s guidance and the Cultural Transformation initiatives already undertaken within the Agency to help create a more diverse, inclusive, and high-performance workplace where all employees and customers are treated with dignity and respect and provided the opportunity for success. Enhanced dialogue and communications within APHIS are at the heart of the Agency’s Cultural Transformation Action Plan: when we truly understand and embrace our differences—and fully utilize employees’ unique talents, abilities, and perspectives—we grow and improve as an organization.

Recognizing that ideal, one of the goals APHIS included in its Cultural Transformation plan was to issue this report on internal communications, providing greater transparency to employees about our progress and efforts in this critical area. The results APHIS is seeking through this and other Cultural Transformation goals and initiatives include better decisionmaking, increased efficiency and effectiveness, higher employee morale and performance, and improved customer service.

Best Practice: Keep the Door Open

PPQ has established a comments mailbox for all employees to submit feedback on the Plant Health Strategies Task Force report and the response to it. The report had a strong focus on better equipping employees to participate in and understand the decisions made and to serve as ambassadors in explaining Agency policies and decisions. PPQ is now following through on the recommendations in those two areas.

*“...thanks for the opportunity to comment on agencywide topics. I hope I can contribute to the pool of ideas regularly.”
~ Denise Barnes, PPD*



Next Steps



This framework is designed to...ensure APHIS' internal communications drive mission results and help employees feel more engaged with, and supported by, the Agency.

The AMT recognizes the importance of internal communications to the Agency and is committed to improving its effectiveness at all levels.

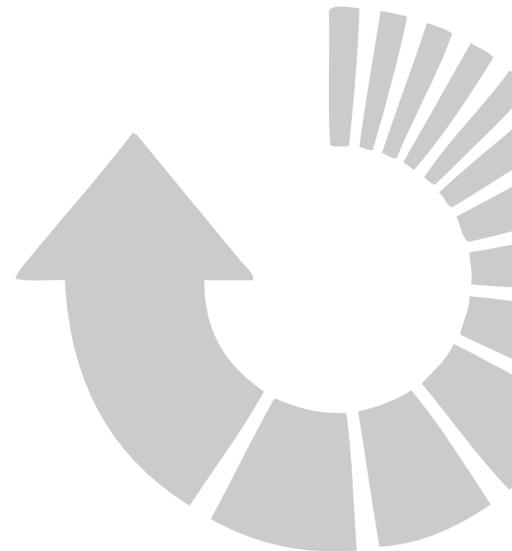
APHIS employees have been invaluable in guiding the direction of the Agency's actions and improvements to date, all of which have been in direct response to their needs and feedback.

As the Agency continues moving forward, it is essential for APHIS leadership to capitalize on these improvements and lessons learned, provide more coordination between Agency and program internal communications efforts, engage employees in all of these initiatives, and ensure APHIS' internal communications drive mission results and help employees feel more engaged with, and supported by, the Agency.

The following sections set forth APHIS' next steps—the Agency's framework for successful internal communications, including guiding principles, actions and areas of responsibility, and recommended tools and strategies.

Best Practice: Connect With Others

MRPBS in Minneapolis has a standing committee called "Connecting With Customers." MRPBS brings in the APHIS programs periodically to present on their work and its connection to MRPBS' work. As part of this effort, the committee has also done site visits with smaller groups of employees, including VS, WS, AC, and AMS Dairy. By treating their colleagues as customers and making an active effort to connect with their work, Minneapolis employees gain a better understanding of how to best support them and advance their respective missions.



Guiding Principles

The following are APHIS' guiding principles for internal communications.

These guidelines were formed by the Agency's senior leadership—including the AMT and PLG—to establish a shared standard for the Agency's approach to internal communications.

As new initiatives and programs emerge, the Agency will focus on internal communications consistent with the guiding principles and partner with employees, soliciting their involvement in, and feedback on, possible responses, regulations, and operations. And as new tools or approaches come on line that can support internal communications, program management teams should carefully consider them in this context as well, reflecting the Agency's guiding principles and maintaining a collaborative, employee-centered approach.

- The Office of the Administrator and the AMT set the goals and priorities for the Agency's internal communications.
- Individual program management teams are responsible for coordinating efforts in support of APHIS' internal communications goals and priorities.
- APHIS' management support units (MRPBS, PPD, and LPA) lead aspects of the Agency's internal communications and provide counsel and support to programs as they undertake supporting efforts.
- All program internal communications should directly support or otherwise reflect APHIS' internal communications goals and priorities.

- All APHIS senior leaders are communications leaders in the Agency and, as such, are responsible for conveying Agency priority information and messages to employees across their programs.
- APHIS senior leaders are also charged with devising effective communications channels within their programs, ensuring that they are familiar with employee feedback, perspectives, and needs and that they regularly communicate this information to members of the AMT for development and refinement of APHIS internal communications priorities and areas of focus.
- APHIS believes there is no substitute for meaningful, in-person dialog between supervisors and managers—as well as senior leaders—and employees.
- Programs should make every effort to convene regular work unit; State-level; regional; and all-hands meetings, either in person or “virtually,” to maximize dialog and convey to employees the important role they play in advising the Agency as policy, regulations, and operations are developed.
- Other approaches to internal communications, especially those that make use of information technology tools, are secondary to in-person communication and should complement, not replace, these efforts.

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Coordinated Efforts

The following actions on the part of APHIS senior leaders and managers will help to set clear goals, areas of responsibility, and actions for the Agency's internal communications efforts.

- Each year, AMT members' performance plans will include internal communications goals that contribute to mission success and support employee engagement. At least one internal communications goal per AMT member should originate from specific feedback and/or ideas generated by employees through engagement and collaboration tools and efforts.
- APHIS' yearly operating plan will include specific goals for improving and refining internal communications in the Agency.
- Examples of internal communications goals include:
 - committing to holding a set number of listening sessions with employees at locations across the country;
 - developing a coordinated plan for regularly communicating major initiatives and important Department, Agency, and program information to employees; and
 - working in conjunction with APHIS management support units on communications-related initiatives (i.e., building an Agency program Web portal that increases information-sharing within each program and supports the APHIS Web portal).
- Program management teams will develop plans for meeting APHIS' internal communications goals.
- The Office of the Administrator, AMT, and PLG will monitor progress made toward internal communications goals and help to ensure coordination of communications efforts across the Agency.

"Identifying goals and expectations for our employees...takes time to think through and lay out in a clear way so that they can bring their talents to bear. Oftentimes, that degree of clarity has just not been a given. We really need to strive for that, work together with employees in the process of day to day to get there."
~ Sharon Coursey, MRPBS



Tools and Strategies

Successful internal communications strategies are flexible, focus on bringing about specific outcomes, understand how employees want to receive information and messages, and make it easy for employees to offer feedback and ideas in support of organizational goals and priorities.

In building such plans for meeting internal communications goals, APHIS encourages Agency programs to blend different internal communications tools and strategies to increase interactions and exchanges of information with employees. Tools and strategies include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Incorporate internal communications into monthly exchanges of information and messages provided by the AMT to employees.
- Develop internal “rollout” plans to convey information to employees on program decisions, regulations, stakeholder engagement plans, and other initiatives prior to these actions being communicated outside the Agency.
- Maximize opportunities for in-person interaction during travel by APHIS senior leaders (i.e., hold more listening sessions with employees at State offices and regional hubs).
- Convene regular listening sessions and all-hands meetings via video or teleconference when travel is not possible.
- Collect, assess, and share employee feedback with APHIS senior leaders to assist with communication goal planning and monitoring.
- Look for opportunities to add content to, or otherwise shape development of, the APHIS Web portal.
- Utilize the “Up the Chain” collaboration site to share program proposals with employees, seeking their responses and feedback prior to Agency decisionmaking.
- Review all existing internal communications tactics (such as weekly reports, staff and Agency newsletters, and regular email and voicemail messages to employees) to determine their effectiveness and ways to adapt them to support APHIS’ internal communications goals.
- Support regular meetings at each APHIS work unit to discuss issues and perspectives on Agency internal communications and convey employee feedback and ideas from these meetings to appointed APHIS senior leaders.
- Determine methods to assess the effectiveness of internal communications efforts and make adjustments as necessary to achieve goals.
- Evaluate new offerings to employees and continue exploring ways to enhance the APHIS Web portal, add program pages, and identify additional collaboration tools.
- Ensure that the use of any new technology has a valid purpose and that employees’ level of comfort with the new technology has been considered prior to its implementation.

“The most successful programs tend to be those that communicate effectively. We can’t serve APHIS customers well unless our internal house is in order.”
~ Bill Clay, WS

Conclusion

As APHIS moves forward with enhancing its internal communications, this framework stands as a living document. In short, the same way it was developed is the same way it must be implemented: guided by and dependent on feedback from APHIS employees. With that in mind, it is essential for APHIS managers and staff to make use of the opportunities and tools currently available and participate actively in this initiative to improve our communications.

Ultimately, communication is not just words—it's behaviors and actions. And it will take collective action on the part of all of us at APHIS to change the way we interact with each other and ensure that the quality of our internal communications reflects our shared vision and goals.

Best Practice: Make It Routine

A number of APHIS programs have found success in a regular schedule of meetings/conference calls and other communication formats with management, among staff, or both. For example, the WS Deputy Administrator provides a brief, recorded message from his office each week for all WS employees (particularly those in the field) to call in and hear from headquarters about the latest program issues and activities. PPD holds all-staff meetings on a quarterly basis, and LPA has a similar "Giant Staff Meeting" twice a year. VS has in place a monthly conference call, the VS Deputy's Open Forum Call, that is open to all program employees. AC's field employees generate a biannual program newsletter for all program employees to share information from a field perspective.

