

“I Don’t Do Email.”—How Ditching “Professional” Communications Can Build Stronger Collaboration with the Community

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Abstract

Conventional language and practices of professionalism often erect barriers in communities rather than foster collaboration. In this narrative, the Director of Communications for Read by 4th, a Philadelphia-based early literacy movement, shares insights into how language can be used to cultivate stronger community engagement.

Introduction

Professionalism, the native language of the workplace, often acts as more of a barrier than a bridge when it comes to engaging with communities. As we navigate sectors, neighborhoods, and lived experiences, it's important to realize that our shared passions and visions for the future can easily be lost in a sea of jargon and unintentionally exclusionary workplace norms.

But there’s an easy fix.

As the Director of Communications for **Read by 4th** <<https://www.readby4th.org/>>, Philly’s early literacy movement, I’ve learned some invaluable insights on how being more intentional with language can help foster stronger collaboration and relationships with the community.

Meet people where they are—and it’s probably not their inbox.

Ever tried sending a meeting request to your kid? Yeah, it’s not the most effective strategy to get them to come to dinner.

One of the greatest insights into effective community engagement is understanding that not everyone relies on the same communication channels. While many of us cling to our email inboxes like lifelines, others let their notifications pile high or simply don’t check them at all.

So, how do we bridge this communication gap? Simple—meet people where they are. When working with the community, face-to-face communications tend to be the most impactful. But we can't always meet in person. If you must send an email, it’s important to remember that many community members use their personal email, which is checked less frequently and after the work day. We’ve found texts, quick calls, and social media reminders to be effective alternatives.

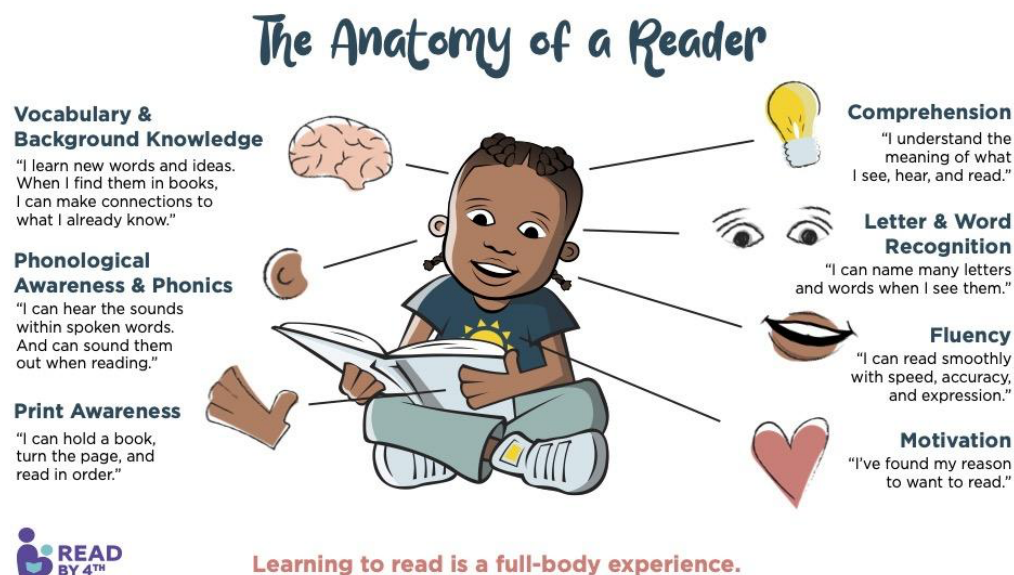
Working together takes flexibility and a willingness to send out different types of outreach to meet the unique needs of all of our partners. For us, that upfront effort is a small price for inclusive engagement.

Speak human, not jargon.

Leverage synergies strategically; Optimize systemic outputs; Elevate and engage stakeholders; What are we even talking about?

It's so important that we cut the jargon and speak to each other like human beings. Plain language isn't about dumbing anything down; it's about lifting everyone up. When we speak clearly, we deepen both our understanding of our subject matter and each other.

Now, this doesn't mean abandoning important terminology altogether. But we must be mindful of our audience and take the time to define big words without making anyone have to ask. Take the example of Read by 4th's Anatomy of Reader graphic. This slide was designed to invite parents and caregivers into the conversation about the Science of Reading—a comprehensive body of research about how children learn to read—by breaking down complex terms into relatable concepts.



Leave your rank by the door.

Giving community members a seat at the table is a good start. But we can't stop there.

As collaboration and co-design gain popularity, we have to recognize the power dynamics carried into these spaces and strive for inclusivity. Too often community members are brought in with little to no thought of what it means to welcome them.

Lived experience is just as valuable as learned experience. And making sure this value is not only stated but felt takes work.

As a convener and host, some ways Read by 4th does this is by starting with warm-up activities that set the tone for collaboration and put everyone on level ground. We've also found success in recognizing the diverse roles each person brings to the table. Sure, you might be a policymaker by day, but at home, you're a gracious grandad. To honor these multifaceted identities at events and meetings, we've given out lapel pin identifiers like "parent," "advocate," and "educator," surfacing complexity and sparking conversations about what unites us.

Honor the time and emotional labor of collaboration.

As an early literacy campaign, it shouldn't come as a surprise that we've centered language at the heart of effective cross-sector collaboration. In our journey towards social change, the spotlight often shines on flashy innovations. Yet it's often the quieter revelations—subtle shifts in mindsets and practices—that truly mark progress.

Much of the professional world is built on trading business cards, pleasantries, and favors. While this is a bit crass, the point is that these relationships rely heavily on productivity and mutual extraction. But working alongside the community takes and gives so much more.

We can't approach inclusive collaboration solely in terms of ticking boxes or maximizing impact. To do this work well requires getting to know people on a human level, talking with and not at them, building trust, and shifting our mindset from extractive collaborations to meaningful relationships. Sometimes, this looks like an hour-long phone after a meeting, attending events on the weekend, or sharing jokes on a ride home. These gestures may seem small, but they're the very foundation of collective action.

What are you willing to do to make sure the community is truly seen, heard, and elevated? As social innovators, let's recognize that this is the work—and that it's worth it. Because at the end of the day, changing the world really does happen one conversation at a time.