

Step 7

Crafting Key Messages

What is a key message?

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A message is a concise and persuasive statement about your advocacy objective. It captures what you want to achieve, why and how. As its purpose is to create action, it must also include the specific action that you want the audience to take.

As a result of working through the previous steps you have gained a clearer picture of who you need to be speaking to (key AIDS actors including primary and secondary targets), what you are going to be speaking to them about (your key issues brought into focus through your objectives) and in your last step you have begun to think about partnerships.

Assuming that you will be working with partners you will need to find a balance between how you want to communicate your messages and your need to respect whatever sensitivities are necessary to preserve your partnerships. This you can sort out later, but first you need to have a clear idea of the things you want to say.

A good deal can be said about messaging, but without the benefit of your knowledge of your political environment and the key issues you have chosen it is difficult to be precise in this kit. Still there are some basic principles.

The key is to keep it simple.

Leave the details to position papers and letters to officials—and make sure these types of materials include your key messages—but when talking about the issues in public settings, keep it simple. Your messages should be simple and clear enough so that anyone who hears and agrees with it can easily repeat it to someone else—which is exactly what you want them to do.

Characteristics of effective messages

The effectiveness of your message depends on a number of factors.

The messages you are going to be communicating will take many forms. They may appear in writing in the form of letters, position papers, statements, petitions and posters; they may be spoken in both formal and informal settings; for the more creative, they may be sung or appear in dramatic form; and today it is even possible they might be texted or tweeted.

In all of these forms, you should strive for your advocacy messages to be:

- **Clear:** Is the message absolutely clear?
- **Engaging:** Does the audience feel that the message speaks to them?
- **Persuasive:** Is their personal stake in the issue obvious? Can they sense the negative consequences of inaction and the positive consequences of acting?
- **Compelling:** Does the message convince the audience to take action and tell them what to do?

There are other considerations for messages especially when taking into account where your message is going to appear, in what format and in what setting. These include:

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- **The source.** The messenger is often as important as the message itself. It is important to choose an individual or organisation that the audience finds credible and will respond to.
- **Timing.** The timing of an activity can enhance or detract from your message. Your message can be drowned in a sea of other news on any given day. If you know in advance this is a possibility you should forgo releasing new “news” until it has a chance of being heard. A good general rule of thumb is to not get into playing the game of trying to pick the perfect time—see consistency. If timing rather than content is more important to make your message effective, then it would be a good idea to rethink whether the content of your message is what it should be.
- **Consistency.** It is important to deliver a consistent message to your target audience through a variety of channels over an extended period of time. Messages will not be absorbed by audiences and influence their opinion overnight. As such, repetition is vital – delivering the same message in different ways in order to increase your impact.

Another important point for you to consider is the need to be consistent about communicating a trade union perspective, particularly if you have chosen—as is recommended—to act in partnership with other groups. A trade union perspective can be communicated with all of the qualities above and is especially needed in the key areas you have identified as your goals.

After all, you know better than anyone else why it is important to ensure the inclusion of working people and their organisations in the national AIDS strategy. Your union has the authority to speak up on behalf of a critical part of the population that universal access may otherwise leave out. So never waver from calling for support for the issues that motivated you to stand up in the first place.

Know your audience

Whether your audience is one or a thousand, a politician, a UN official, your General Secretary or the entire membership, you have to try to communicate your message in a way that is appropriate to your audience. This involves understanding them, having a sense of what they know already and of their attitudes on this and similar issues, and finding ways of presenting points that make sense to them and that build on the familiar – even if you want to go on to introduce new and possibly difficult ideas.

Developing key messages for labour

Labour has always had unique reasons why it should be a key part of the response to AIDS. One of the obvious is that labour is present in the one place that most people share in common—the workplace.

The sheer size of its membership is almost always much larger when compared with other civil society organisations. Another characteristic is the diversity of its members and the type of work they do. Often the geographic distribution of that membership—usually not solely confined to urban areas. Ties to the community are usually strong.

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Labour is usually among the most established non-governmental social institutions with democratically elected leaders and procedures to ensure that its leadership represents the sentiments of its members. It has vast experience in organising, coalition building, mobilising and political advocacy. Few organisations engage in negotiating and conflict resolution on a more regular basis than labour.

These are just a few reasons why labour should be raising its voice and has the ability to ensure that its voice is heard. What are the messages that will resonate best in your country?

Remember that though these characteristics set labour apart from other civil society actors, they are not a substitute for a track record of action. Long before resources are available to support expanded programmes, labour needs to demonstrate its response to AIDS and, equally important, to develop key messages that illustrate *what labour is already doing* with the few resources it has.

Summing up

In completing this step, you have:

- gained an understanding of the characteristics of a key message;
- recognized the importance of your audience; and,
- considered strengths of labour to include in key messages.