

Nine Principles of Strategic Communication

The nine principles of strategic communication are jointly recognized by U.S. government, military, and civilian organizations. These principles are the foundation to developing and executing effective strategic communication. The nine principles may be found in the Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy, Appendix A, 24 June 2010 and Joint Publication 3-61, Public Affairs, 25 August 2010.

1. Leadership-Driven—Leaders must decisively engage and drive the strategic communication process.

To ensure integration of communication efforts, leaders should place communication at the core of everything they do. Successful Strategic Communication – integrating actions, words, and images – begins with clear leadership intent and guidance. Desired objectives and outcomes are then closely tied to major lines of operation outlined in the organization, command or joint campaign plan. The results are actions and words linked to the plan. Leaders also need to properly resource strategic communication at a priority comparable to other important areas such as logistics and intelligence.

2. Credible—Perception of truthfulness and respect between all parties.

Credibility and consistency are the foundation of effective communication; they build and rely on perceptions of accuracy, truthfulness, and respect. Actions, images, and words must be integrated and coordinated internally and externally with no perceived inconsistencies between words and deeds or between policy and deeds. Strategic Communication also requires a professional force of properly trained, educated, and attentive communicators. Credibility also often entails communicating through others who may be viewed as more credible.

3. Understanding—Deep comprehension of attitudes, cultures, identities, behavior, history, perspectives and social systems.

What we say, do, or show, may not be what others hear or see. An individual's experience, culture, and knowledge provide the context shaping their perceptions and therefore their judgment of actions. We must understand that concepts of moral values are not absolute, but are relative to the individual's societal and cultural narrative. Audiences determine meaning by interpretation of our communication with them; thus what we say, do, or show, may not be what they hear or see. Acting without understanding our audiences can lead to critical misunderstandings with serious consequences.

4. Dialogue—Multi-faceted exchange of ideas to promote understanding and build relationships.

Effective communication requires a multi-faceted dialogue among parties. It involves active listening, engagement, and the pursuit of mutual understanding, which leads to trust. Success depends upon building and leveraging relationships. Leaders should take advantage of these relationships to place U.S. policies and actions in context prior to operations or events. Successful development and implementation of communication strategy will seldom happen overnight; relationships take time to develop and require listening, respect for culture, and trust-building.

5. Pervasive—Every action, image, and word sends a message.

Communication no longer has boundaries, in time or space. All players are communicators, wittingly or not. Everything the Joint Force says, does, or fails to do and say, has intended and unintended consequences. Every action, word, and image sends a message, and every team member is a messenger, from the 18-year-old rifleman to the commander. All communication can have strategic impact, and unintended audiences are unavoidable in the global information environment; therefore, leaders must think about possible “Nth” order communication results of their actions.

6. Unity of Effort—Integrated and coordinated, vertically and horizontally.

Strategic Communication is a consistent, collaborative process that must be integrated vertically from strategic through tactical levels, and horizontally across stakeholders. Leaders coordinate and synchronize capabilities and instruments of power within their area of responsibility, areas of influence, and areas of interest to achieve desired outcomes. Recognizing that your agency/organization will not act alone, ideally, all those who may have an impact should be part of communication integration.

7. Results-Based—Actions to achieve specific outcomes in pursuit of a well-articulated end state.

Strategic communication should be focused on achieving specific desired results in pursuit of a clearly defined end state. Communication processes, themes, targets and engagement modes are derived from policy, strategic vision, campaign planning and operational design. Strategic communication is not simply “another tool in the leader’s toolbox,” but must guide all an organization does and says; encompassing and harmonized with other functions for desired results.

8. Responsive—Right audience, right message, right time, and right place.

Strategic Communication should focus on long-term end states or desired outcomes. Rapid and timely response to evolving conditions and crises is important as these may have strategic effects. Communication strategy must reach intended audiences through a customized message that is relevant to those audiences. Strategic Communication involves

the broader discussion of aligning actions, images, and words to support policy, overarching strategic objectives and the longer term big picture. Acting within adversaries' decision cycles is also key because tempo and adaptability count. Frequently there will be a limited window of opportunity for specific messages to achieve a desired result.

9. Continuous—Diligent ongoing research, analysis, planning, execution, and assessment that feeds planning and action.

Strategic Communication is a continuous process of research and analysis, planning, execution, and assessment. Success in this process requires diligent and continual analysis and assessment feeding back into planning and action. Strategic Communication supports the organization's objectives by adapting as needed and as plans change. The SC process should ideally operate at a faster tempo or rhythm than our adversaries.