

## WM2017 Conference Panel Report

### PANEL SESSION 118: Best Practices in Project Communications

**Co-Chairs:** **Jeannette Hyatt**, *Savannah River National Laboratory*  
**Judith Connell**, *Fluor Corporation*

**Panel Reporter:** **William Badger**, *CH2M*

#### Panelists:

1. **Kristen Ellis**, *Director of External Affairs/Acting Director of Communications, US DOE*
2. **Mike Nartker**, *US DOE EM*
3. **Karen Edson**, *Public Participation Specialist, US DOE Legacy Management*
4. **Michael Koentop**, *US DOE Oak Ridge*
5. **Amy Joslin**, *Director, Public Affairs & Project Communications, AECOM - Savannah River Remediation*
6. **Sonya Johnson**, *Director of Communications, CH2M HILL PRC*
7. **Annika Toenniessen**, *Fluor Corporation*
8. **Kelly Black**, *Neptune and Company, Inc.*

This panel will have participation from internal and external stakeholders and demonstrate use of tools and techniques to effectively communicate factors that inform decisions. The desired outcome is to effectively communicate how risk is evaluated at complex sites, highlight holistic site level approaches that are protective of human health and the environment, and incorporate policy and technical concerns related to achieving alternative end points. This discussion will include existing decision-making tools in conjunction with case studies.

**Kristin Ellis**: We recognize that we have a tremendous number of stakeholders across the complex. Our biggest challenge at HQ is that we have so many stakeholders. It is challenge because the mission is big and there is still so much so much more to work to do. On any given day, we are giving the speech of what we do to any number of people. We have a presidential transition coming up, with a slate of new people coming into new roles with no knowledge of what we do. We have our challenges ahead.

**Mike Nartker**: Now that I am with DOE, I realize how many trying to be proactive in trying to tell our stories. We have had great success with the EM Update in sharing stories from across the complex. We took simple steps to make it more “newsy” by adding contractor fee, at the site level, it is very important to build relationships and generate good will with local reporters who are not out to get you, but are just trying to raise interest in the site. At HQ, on a national level, the media tends to only be interested when something goes wrong.

**Karen Edson**: I am with the DOE Office of Legacy Management. Our office is long term story telling. I find it helpful when communicating looking through three different license. The first is, the second is the data. We need to look at the data and what are the results. Third, we need to look at the media, what is it that is important to them? Be transparent, try to be proactive. If we don't tell our story, someone else will. There are numerous viewpoints for different audiences. Understand your audience and what is important to them.

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**Michael Koentop:** At Oak Ridge we are doing cleanup at three different sites. We need to develop a consistent message and make sure that everyone is speaking from the same message. Everyone has a lot of different publics, all within a single community.

**Amy Joslin:** How do we put that into proper perspective? What we found that works with our stakeholders is to give them short, brief soundbites. How do we make it memorable – soundbites? Make your story relevant, something the public or your audience can understand.

**Sonya Johnson:** Director of Communications. At Hanford, we have some exciting stories to tell. But we are trying to build trust. We are building a solid, and strategic communications plan – this allows us to all sing from one hymnbook to help build a consistent message. One of the challenges we face is the lack of understanding what we do. All our employees are our ambassadors – so making sure they have that “consistent message” is vitally important.

**Annika Toenniese:** I do all the external relations for our Fluor Government services group. But that involves coordinating between our sites as well.

My name is **Kelly Black.** I am representing small businesses. I have to be responsible for communicating DOE’s messages. I may not have the same training as the professional communicators on this panel. What I really appreciate is two-way communication. We can’t just be communicating to our audiences, but have to let them communicate back to us. Facts without context can be meaningless. Sometimes we have to share very technical information but we also have to receive information back. We are trying to create a framework setting the stage for effective dialogue.

**Q - What actions are useful in improving the effectiveness of the communications and how does this impact mission success?**

**A - Kelly Black:** It is extremely difficult to measure the efficacy of communication. Unfortunately, we do not have really good metrics of the success of our communications.

**A - Sonya Johnson:** Good communication does not always lead to the answer you want. One really important part of impacting mission success is employee engagement. Your employees can help you be successful.

**A - Kristen Ellis:** Often Federal employees have a reputation for not communicating with the latest tools, but I have to say that we have finally have a Flickr Account, a Facebook page, twitter account. We have almost 60,000 subscribers to our newsletter. Another challenge is the gap of new employees who do not know about the nuclear field. I think we have to think how we get new people into the field.

**A - Michael Koentop:** Having a strong internal communications program gets employees excited about the mission.

**A - Mike Nartker:** Communicate often about success. People like to back a winning program. Lots of little stories about success.

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**A - Karen Edson:** Mike mentioned that DOE-EM program has another 50 years, but DOE-LM has forever. I have to rely on our partners. The people in the community are on our side and understand the technical information.

**Q - Rick McCloud with the SRS Community Reuse Organization.** How do you see the role of host communities in supporting communications? Secondly, is the Dept. looking to expand consent based siting?

**A - Kristen Ellis:** We can't carry all the water ourselves, so yes, we rely on the communities to help us communicate the mission and communicating the mission and the success. One of the challenges we are seeing is the generational turnover in the journalist field. The old guard of reporters is disappearing, but they understood the mission, although we took a long time to educate them.

**A - Mike Nartker:** Broadly, education of what we are involved with takes time. Most people want to see their communities cleaned up, EM is probably one of the most parochial programs in the US, but we have to build that support.

**A - Amy Joslin:** Many of our community leaders are extremely helpful in getting messages out. At SRS, we have a great relationship with our communities and they are very supportive.

**A - Michael Koentop:** We are not always going to agree but understanding each other's needs and what is important to each other is important.

### Questions from the Audience:

**Q - BR Ravishankar, Director of Safety at Port Hope initiative, with CNL.** I am looking for the next level down of detail when you have someone opposed to your mission, political turmoil, errors in the media, or local groups opposed to the project.

**A - Kristen Ellis:** We have grants in place with every state government where we have a project. In the intergovernmental realm, we have grants with various stakeholder groups – we enable them to become informed about the project by funding them. We have two different advisory boards. We have the site specific advisory boards which is a formal mechanism that brings together citizen volunteers. They come together to receive briefings, and carry the messages forward to their communities. As far as errors in the media, we have had to take our communication down to a very basic level. We have developed basic fact sheets on “What is radiation, etc.” to help an audience understand....there are a number of social media tools that are helping to get the messages out.

**A - Mike Nartker:** Good reporters will acknowledge that they made a mistake. But educating reporters takes time, you have to develop a relationship. Often the person just doesn't like the story, which is not the same as an error.

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**A - Amy Joslin:** I must agree with Mike that reporters will most often acknowledge their mistakes, but sometimes it is better to just let it go than to get a second day of news through a correction. Never wrestle with a pig, you both get dirty and the pig has a good time. Get in front of the media, so you can tell the story you want to tell.

**A - Sonya Johnson:** We bring reporters out on tours, so they can see the work, gets them a little more perspective.

**A - Karen Edson:** No good deed goes unpunished. You are going to have competing interests, or people who are not going to be on board with your project. It can be a good thing to bring attention to your project through negative media.

**A - Mike Koentop:** You have to stay focused. Don't get distracted by loud competing voices. Stick to your plan. Facebook is not the only tool but it is becoming more increasingly important.

**Q - Jeannette Hyatt:** Recently, the DOE put out a position on scientific integrity. The messages we put out there have to be accurate, timely. How can we more efficiently use the employees to get messages out? At Hanford, for example, they started publishing the Vapors newsletter – has this helped calm nerves at the site.

**A - Mike Nartker:** In my role at DOE, I have responsibility for both the Hanford DOE offices. The Hanford site had to focus on the public website. They do a weekly update and the website sends those “push” messages out. It is important to see the scope and size of these sites. It helps with that understanding...

**Q - Jeannette Hyatt:** With a new administration about to transition in, what are the challenges you see in effectively reaching a representative audience in a timely manner with key messages?

**A - Amy Joslin:** A number of us have been through administrative changes. But we adapt. Everything is about educating someone. The more we communicate the faster we can make progress.

**A - Mike Nartker:** When there is uncertainty, everyone starts talking. If you don't provide the information, your audiences will fill it in for you.

**A - Kristen Ellis:** With this administration, we are hearing a lot about infrastructure, but at the end of the day we still need to educate on the mission.

**Q - Judith Connell:** Having come from a site, would it be a benefit for the HQ folks to be at a site for a period of time in understanding political sensitivities, challenges, etc.?

**A - Mike Nartker:** It does take time to get information back and forth. I think that the sites need to be responsive, but HQ needs education too.

**A - Kristen Ellis:** I am not a subject matter expert for the site issues, I can't be, which is why it is important for headquarters to go to the sites and get to know what.

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**Question from the Audience: Dee Millikin, Hanford PRC.** First, I would like to thank **Mike Nartker** for reaching across the divide to the site and bridging between HQ and the sites. I would like to thank the contractors for being their subject matter expert for the two minutes that they need to be. For the contractors, what is your best advice for communicating to workers, our largest stakeholder.

**A - Amy Joslin:** We can get instantaneous messages out through a service of monitors called liquid Air includes trivia, fun facts, etc. We have a push email. We have e-publications.

**A - Sonya Johnson:** At PRC, we have a newsletter that goes out regularly that includes employee messages but we also do a lot video which is received

**Comment from the Audience: Jeff Fry, DOE-RL.** I have a lesson learned being prepared to be proactive. One of the things we are doing at Hanford, we are developing canned messages for items that could come up during an event. It is helpful to have a stockpile of messages and soundbites that can be readily available.

**A - Michael Koentop:** we are going through the same process at OR, and looking at the delivery method that we can be proactive, and prepared for in an emergency event.

**A - Annika Toenniessen:** At Fluor we are at a number of sites, so I have to collect information from each and share that with the others. Working across the sites is important in sharing lessons learned.

### Final thoughts

**Amy Joslin** - Positive feedback is welcome. Every once in a while, it is nice to receive feedback.

**Sonya Johnson** - We talked about one way communication, don't forget to take surveys from your employees – get their perspective.

**Annika Toenniessen** - At the end of the day, we are all trying to do the same mission

**Mike Nartker** - A lot of good stories are out there that will help to build mission support. There is a real opportunity to grab success now to build.

**Kristen Ellis** - I would like to make a quick plug for the DOE Cleanup Workshop this September. This is another opportunity to keep the momentum going in sharing lessons learned. At HQ, we are also one of those audiences that needs to be educated. I encourage you to reach out to us. We can't be successful without the partnership of the sites and contractors.

**Karen Edson** - It is so important to know you audience. We are all here on the same team. Safety is a priority, we are all working towards the same end of cleaning up the environment.

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**Comment from the Audience: Mindy with the SRS Community Reuse Organization.** The value of what you do when you communicate with your employees. There is nothing more apparent when we (the community) comes across an employee who is engaged is very apparent.