Risk Communication: A Toolbox for Strategic Planning

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What is ITRC?

- ITRC is the non-profit research arm of Environmental Research Institute of the States (ERIS) and managed by ECOS
- It is a state-led coalition working to advance the use of innovative environmental technologies and approaches.
- Formed in 1994, ITRC is a national environmental organization with regulators from all 50 states, as well as federal, tribal, industry and public stakeholder active members.

Risk Communication Toolkit Document Published

- Final web document, Risk Communication Toolkit RCT-1:
  - https://rct-1.itrcweb.org/
  - Developed by the PFAS, 1,4-Dioxane and Harmful Cyanobacterial Blooms (HCBs) teams
  - Recognize that risk communication is broader than any specific environmental issue
  - Highlight the value of this science-based communication approach
  - Additional tools and case studies added and updated by ITRC teams as they are developed

Learning Objectives

- Understand risk communication basics.
- Gain knowledge of risk communication planning best practices that will assist you in creating a robust outreach strategy.
- Obtain techniques in developing PFAS communication messages.

Risk Communication Definition

The process of informing people about potential hazards to their person, property, or community.

Scholars define risk communication as a science-based approach for communicating effectively in situations of high stress, high concern or controversy.

https://www.epa.gov/risk/risk-communication

NJDEP 1991. “Improving Dialogues with Communities: A Risk communication Manual for Government.” by B. J. Hance, C. Chess and P. M. Sandman. New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

Principles of Risk Communication

- Establishing dialogues early and continuing through to resolution.
- Including the community in the decision-making process.
- Presenting accessible and clear information.
- Addressing uncertainties head on - communicate what is known and what is unknown.
- Listening, acknowledging, and following up on specific concerns.
- Communicating the context for the risk to help audiences decide how to respond.

Key Aspect of Risk Communication

1. How Communities See Risk
2. Building Trust and Credibility
3. Releasing Information Effectively
4. Interacting with Communities
5. Explaining Risk and Management Strategies

NJDEP 1991

1. How Communities See Risk

ACCEPTABLE

- Voluntary risk
- Individual control
- Fair
- Info from trusted sources
- Morally right
- Natural
- Familiar
- Assoc. w/ catastrophes

UNACCEPTABLE

- Imposed risk
- Government control
- Unfair
- Info from strangers
- Unethical practices
- Artificial
- Unfamiliar
- Associated with daily life

Adapted from USEPA 2007. Communicating Radiation Risks. EPA-402-F-07-008. Washington, D.C.: Office of Radiation and Indoor Air US Environmental Protection Agency
NJDEP 1991

2. Building Trust and Credibility

- Pay attention to and explain processes
- Involve the public early
- Listen to concerns
- Follow up with accurate information
- Only make promises you can keep
- Provide information that meets agency and public needs
- Use local partners for support

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NJDEP. 2014. Establishing Dialogue: Planning for Successful Environmental Management. New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

3. Releasing Information Effectively

- Act - Don't wait
- Share what you know or don't know
- Share with affected public first before a general release
- Talk procedures
- Preliminary data
- Release in context

Open access image
NJDEP 1991

4. Interacting with Communities

- Involve the public
- Use appropriate forums
- Communicate with many different audiences
- Acknowledge and deal with values and feelings expressed
- Respond personally
- Choose appropriate speakers

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NJDEP 1991

5. Explaining Risk and Management Strategies

- Learn stakeholder concerns
- Learn how they receive information
- Understand stakeholder knowledge of the subject
- Use down to earth language
- Make sure graphics are understandable
- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Use risk comparisons carefully
- Provide background materials

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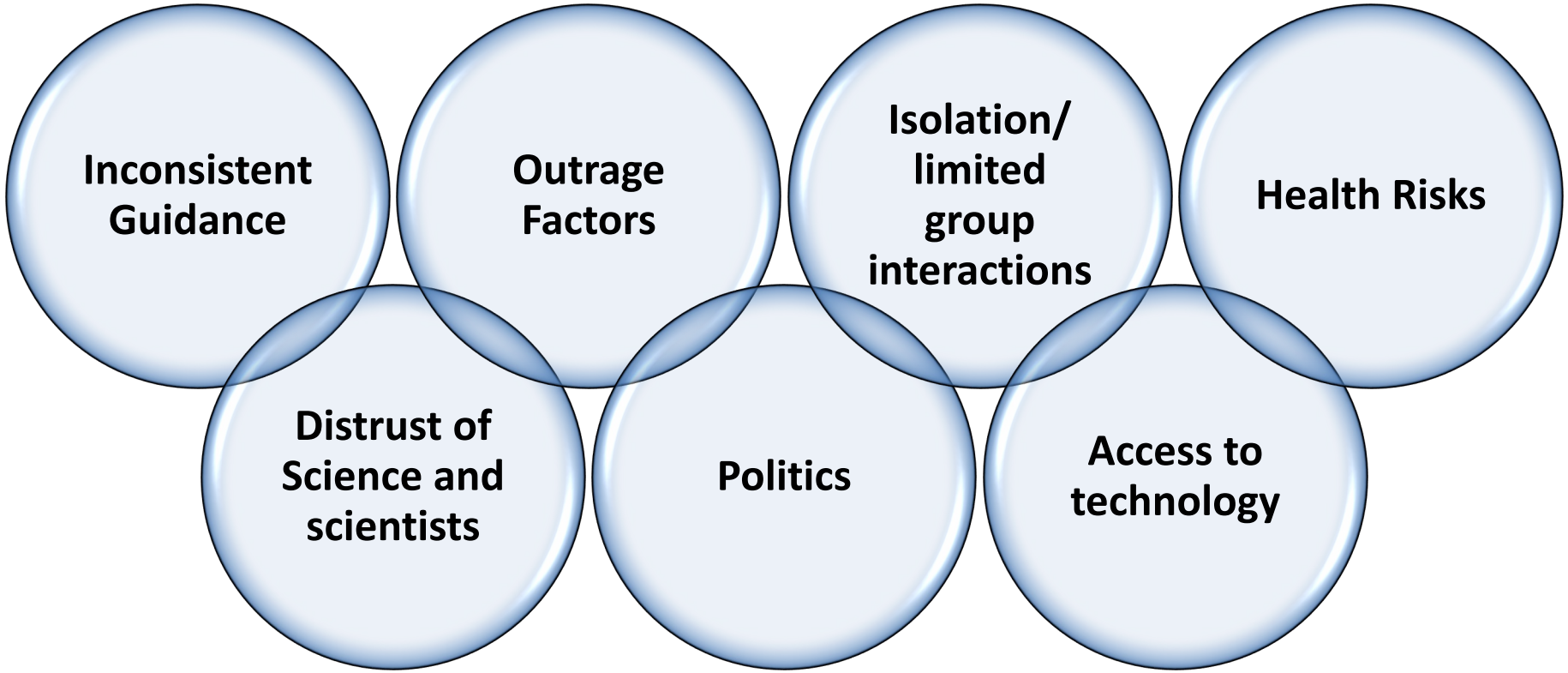
NJDEP 1991

COVID Risk Communication Challenges



Risk Communication Plan Process Diagram

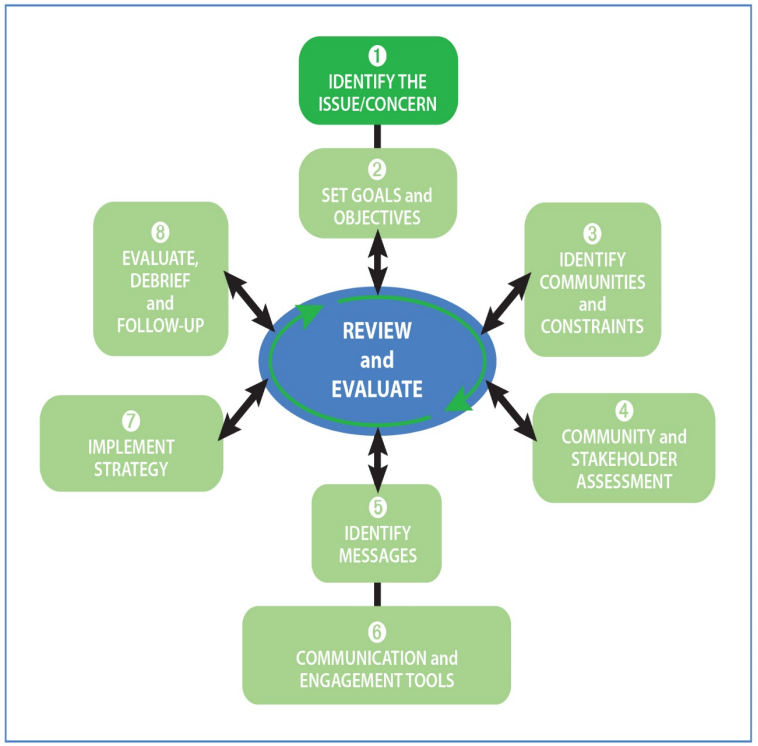
- Risk communication plan process adapted from the work of NJDEP 2014
  - Based on the work of Chess, Hance and Sandman from Rutgers University
  - Facilitates the development of project-specific plans
- Web document, RCT-1
  - Appendix A includes a template to download and fill-in
  - Section 4 describes the process steps
  - Section 5 includes links to case studies
  - Section 6 Additional Information, includes appendices of tools and examples
  - Additional case studies and tools to be linked as developed by other ITRC Issue teams

Source: Modified from NJDEP 2014

RCT-1, Figure 4-1, Communication Plan Description

1. Identify the Issue

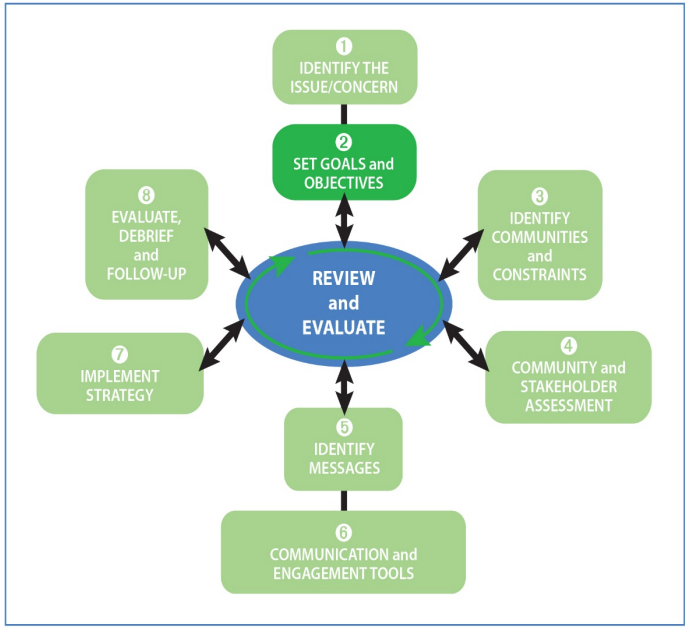
- Establish a case record and clearly state issue
- Identify key internal and external stakeholders
- Determine available resources – time, staff, money, knowledge base
- Compile data on the case
- Profile the affected community
- Review history
- Establish core communication team



NJDEP 2014

2. Set Goals

A "big picture" or ultimate impact desired for a project, issue or situation



SMART Goals are…

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Timely

Examples of a SMART PFAS Goal

- By (date), the community is informed via the municipal website, flyers, and canvassing that bottled water is available as an alternate water source and used by 85% of the affected population.
- After (months), the extent of the impacted water supply is known via well testing, possible remediation options are identified and communicated to the community via a public meeting, municipal website, and newsletter.

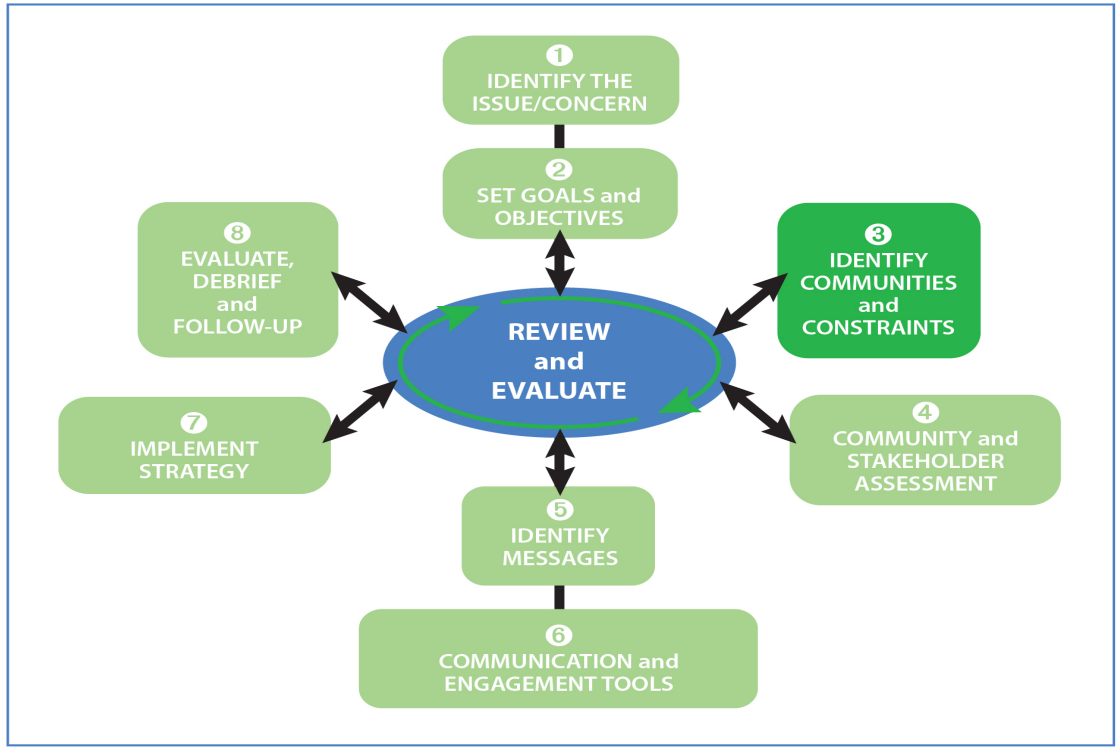
3. Identify Communities and Constraints

Key audiences - those people with whom you need to establish a dialogue with and those who wish to talk with you

- Those who are or must be made aware of the issue and are affected by the problem, those affected by the solution, and the media

Constraints – barriers to communicating

- remote locations, access to the internet, ability to attend engagement activities



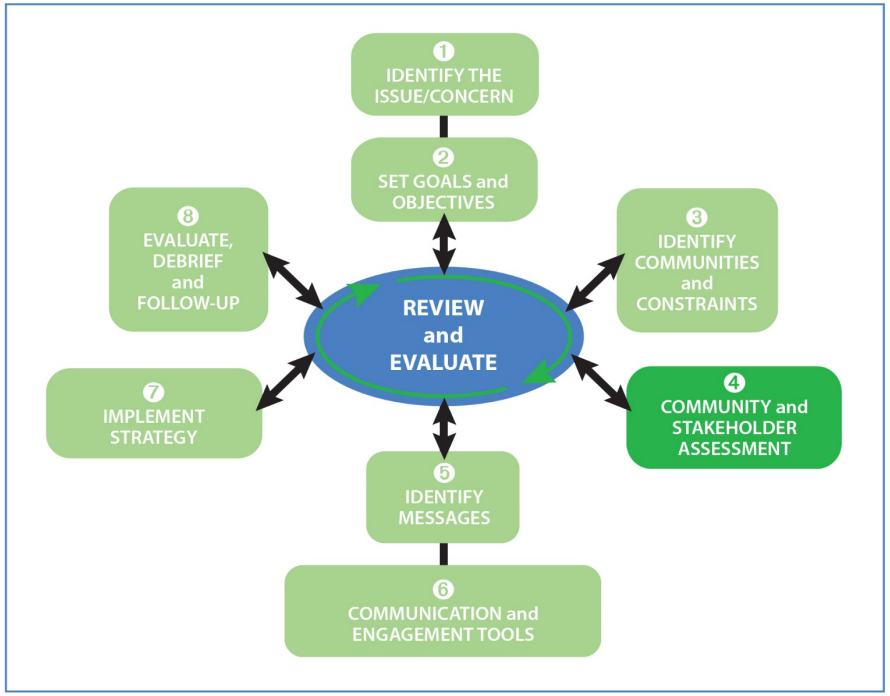
NJDEP 2014

Questions to Identify Audiences

- Who is likely to be affected directly by actions?
- Who was previously involved in this issue?
- Who might have important ideas, information, or opinions?
- Has the lead organization heard the full range of opinions?
- Who are community leaders?

4. Community and Stakeholder Assessment

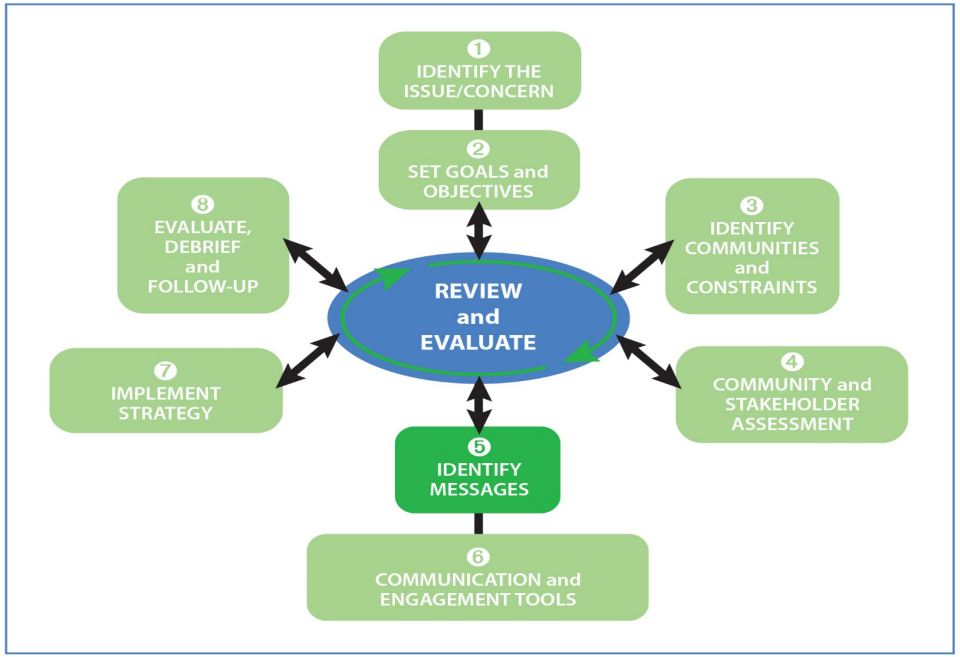
- Review media sources used in community
- Use community partners
- Discuss expected audience concerns with management team
- If appropriate, make a few targeted and/or random contacts to determine audience knowledge, perception and concern about issue



Chess et al. 1989

5. Identify Key Messages

- Accurate, timely information you want or need to share with audiences about the issue or case.
- Linked to the case specific goal.
- Addresses key points about the issue.
- Create consistency in communications.



Stress and Messaging

- People under stress often have difficulty hearing, understanding and remembering information.
- They often lose as much as 80% of the information that is communicated to them.
- They are often distrustful of others.
- They often focus more on the negative than the positive.

Message Mapping Tool

- Starts with a question
- Has three key points or facts formed into a message
- Is no more than 27 words
- Takes no longer than 9 seconds to deliver
- Provides three supporting statements linked to the three key points or facts

Covello, V.T., S. K. Minamyer, and K. Clayton. 2007. Effective Risk and Crisis Communication During Water Security Emergencies: Report of EPA Sponsored Message Mapping Workshops. EPA/600/R-07/027. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Example of a Mapped Message

- What are PFAS and why is the state concerned about them?

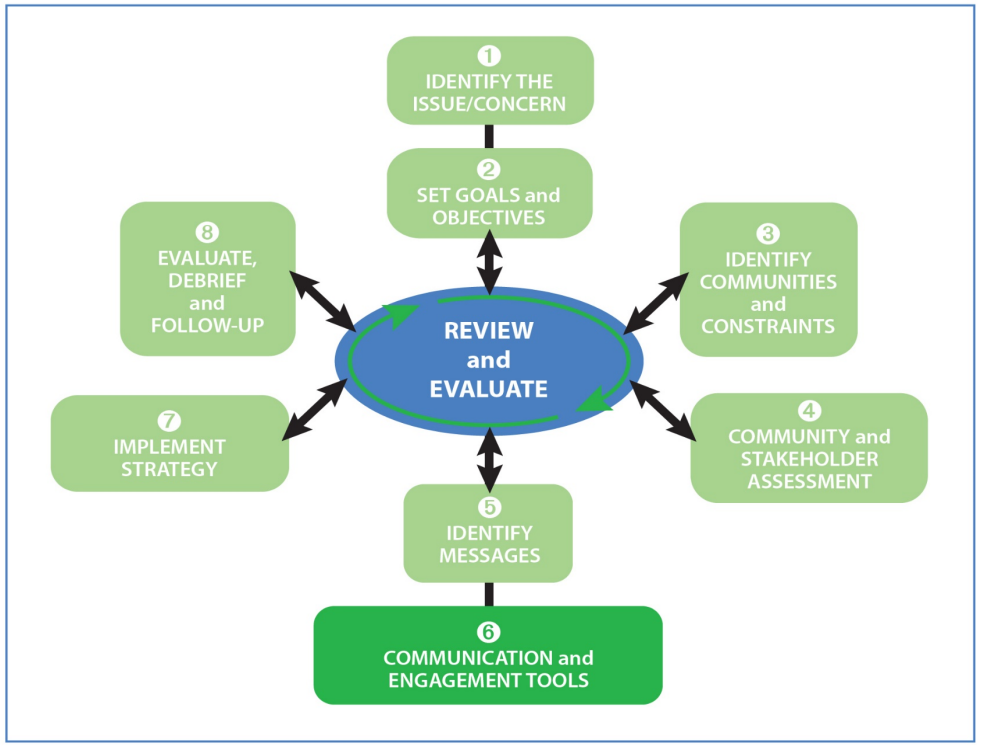
  Main message #1:
  PFAS are a family of man-made chemicals in many products used by consumers and industry. *(15 words)*

  Main message #2:
  PFAS are emerging contaminants of concern. *(6 words)*

  Main message #3:
  PFAS may adversely impact human health. *(6 words)*

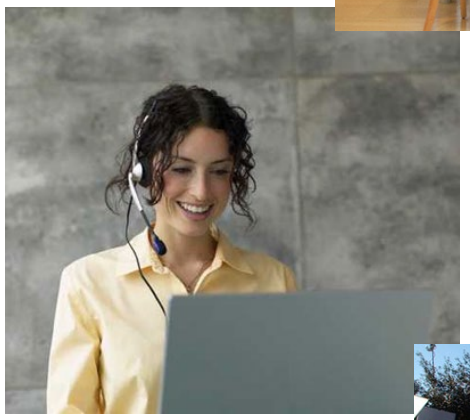
6. Communication and Engagement Tools: Methods

- A communication method is the means by which you communicate with your audiences.
- Selection of a method is based on your goal, how your audience finds or receives information (learned about in the audience assessment), and the nature of the issue.



Method Selection: What do you want to accomplish?

- Receive information from affected people
- Give information to affected people
- Establish dialogue with community
- Summarize or update on progress
- Build consensus



NJDEP 1989. "Alternatives to Public Hearing" by Kerry Kirk Pflugh and Suzanne Shannon, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

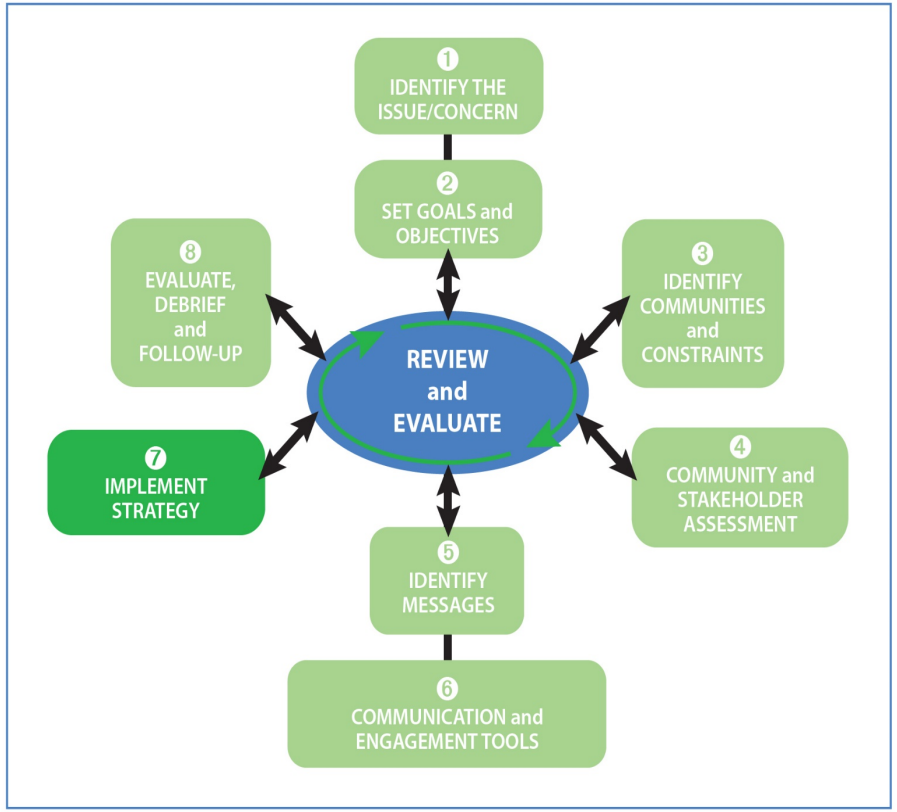
7. Implement Strategy: Communication Task Planning

Develop a material and activity timeline

- List tasks to develop materials
- List activities used for communications

Use the questions below to plan

- How long will tasks take to complete?
- What data needs to be shared and in what form?
- Who is responsible for each task?
- Who is the appropriate spokesperson?
- What constraints may emerge in completing tasks?
- How will the effort be evaluated?



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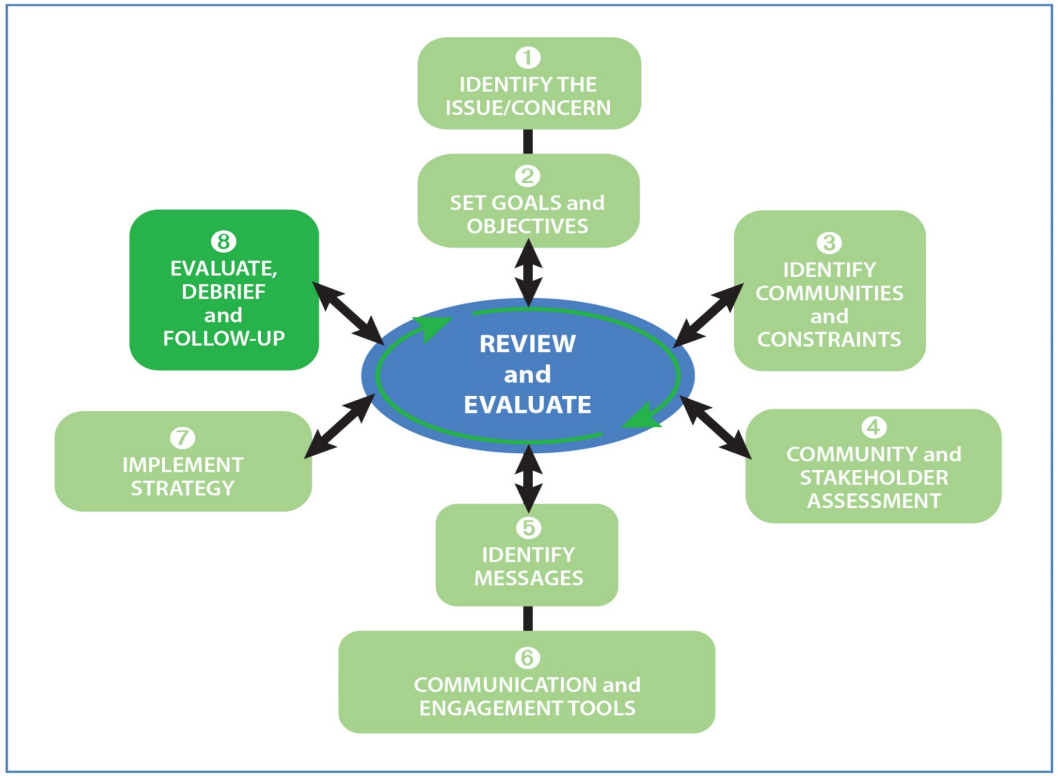
8. Evaluate, Debrief and Follow up

Systematically collect information about materials, activities, and outcomes of projects.

- To assess what went well
- What did not go well
- How to improve effectiveness
- Inform decisions about future programming
- What were the results of outcome evaluation?
- How did ongoing evaluation inform or impact the goals and results?
- What follow-up is needed with the community?
- What ongoing support is needed if any?



ITRC Risk Communication Toolkit

Compilation of **PFAS Fact Sheets, FAQs and other resources** developed by the ASTHO and ECOS are available:

- https://www.astho.org/PFAS/
- https://www.eristates.org/projects/pfas-risk-communications-hub/

Steps 1 & 2 Identify the Issue & Set Goals

- Agenda for First Internal Communication Team Planning Meeting
- PFAS-specific SMART Goals

Steps 3 & 4 Audience Assessment

- Actor Mapping Tools, including PFAS-specific examples

Steps 5 Identify Messages

- Message Mapping Guide
- PFAS-specific Key Messages

Step 6 PFAS-Specific Communication Methods

- Case Studies
- Active Centralized Information Repositories
- Community Education Classes
- Guidance for Writing Analytical Results Summary Letters
- Guidance for Writing Press Releases
- Social Factors Vision Board
- Analytical Data Package Public Information Fact Sheet
- Tracking Form of Media Correspondence

Thank You!

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