SharpInsight

Essential Questions for Data Communication

MOST SIMPLY, DATA MEANS INFORMATION. And these days, every organization seems to have a lot of it! With so much data – both qualitative and quantitative – it is often challenging for leaders to determine how to share the most important information. Yet, effectively sharing data brings organizational findings to life. It can foster transparency, build trust, open lines of communication, highlight successes, and determine opportunities for growth. The next time you are grappling with a data communication challenge, consider these four key questions.

1. WHO?

There's an old saying that goes a little like this, "You aren't communicating to anyone if you're trying to communicate to everyone." In other words, you have to know your audience to in order to craft an effective message. The following questions will help you to narrow in on your audience and their specific needs:

1. With whom, specifically, do I want to share our data?
2. If there are multiple members of my audience, what are some shared professional goals or challenges that they have?
3. How familiar is my audience with the issue area(s), program(s), and type(s) of data I want to share?
4. What is their typical communication style?
5. How will this person or group use the data I am sharing?

2. WHY?

Once you've defined to whom you're speaking, it's essential to think deeply about the *purpose* of your communication. It is your job to lead your audience to the stories that your data are telling. Ask yourself:

1. Why would my audience care about these findings?
2. What is the feeling I want my data to convey (i.e., hopefulness, confidence, inspiration, reassurance)?
3. Does my audience already care about this issue and/or do I need to further connect it to the context of their work or life?
4. Is the primary purpose of sharing my findings to convince my audience, support a commonly held belief, introduce new information, or something else?
5. How are these data part of the bigger organizational story I want to share?

3. WHAT?

When the data are yours, it's easy to feel like you need to share it all. However, when there are too many varying messages your audience can easily be disengaged, distracted, or worse - confused. By strategically selecting fewer data points, you will help your audience focus on your key message. Using the information you have gathered to this point as your guide, work through the following questions:

1. In one sentence, how would I describe the story my data is telling?
2. How is this story relevant to my audience?
3. Specifically, what data points best support this story?
4. In addition to patterns in the data, which outliers (if any) are important to highlight?
5. In order to communicate my story effectively, do I need to pair my findings with any background information?

4. HOW?

When narrowing in on how you present this information, it's important that your selected communication channel shares your data in the most straightforward manner possible. Don't let the allure of beautiful visualization overshadow this decision. Some questions for you and/or your data design specialist include:

1. Before sharing my data, what ethical considerations should I keep in mind (e.g. confidentiality agreements, consents, releases)?
2. Which format (e.g. presentation, report, handout) will most resonate with my audience?
3. If I am sharing quantitative data, how will I use charts, graphs, or icons to represent my findings?
4. If I am sharing qualitative data, how will I use case studies, quote call-outs, or imagery and illustrations?