

Communication planning during change management in remote Indigenous communities

by Dr Damien Howard



Communication planning in Indigenous communities needs to consider that the majority of people living in these communities will have some degree of hearing loss.

Hearing Loss

Conductive hearing loss is often widespread among children and adults who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children who live in crowded housing, whose nutrition is poor, and who have limited access to health care, tend to experience repeated and severe episodes of middle ear disease (otitis media).

Studies have found that up to 90 per cent of the Indigenous children and 60 per cent of the Indigenous adults in remote Indigenous communities have some degree of hearing loss that limits communication in some situations. This does not mean that most of the affected people are 'deaf' (have a severe to profound hearing loss). The majority have a mild to moderate level of hearing loss. This typically has an adverse effect on communication when background noise levels are high, or when people have to understand what is said in English by people they don't know

well and who are speaking to them about unfamiliar topics.

Communication Problems

For many of the people in remote Indigenous communities with hearing loss, communication with non-Indigenous people who they do not know, or do not know well will be more difficult than communication with Indigenous people, or with people who they know and who know them. Familiar Indigenous people are far more likely to use a form of language that people with hearing loss will more easily understand. They will tend to use the extensive non-verbal forms of communication that can supplement or at times even replace words. Also, they will usually make sure that topics for discussion are framed within a familiar cultural context that listeners can draw on to fill in any gaps in understanding that result from their hearing loss.

For many Indigenous people with hearing loss, the communication difficulties that they face can lead to high levels of anxiety and frustration in some situations. It is important to realise that this can happen in the course of what seems to be a quite straightforward conversation. This is one of

the reasons why many Indigenous people can at times seem shy and reticent. They may also seek to manage the risks associated with their communication difficulties by avoiding contact and communication with unfamiliar non-Indigenous people.










Change and Communication Planning

Communication difficulties will be greatest when usual routines are altered and when unfamiliar non-Indigenous people are talking about issues from a different cultural perspective. In such situations a communication plan becomes a very important component of any process of change.

Communication planning is essential. *First*, to minimise the degree of anxiety and frustration that may be experienced by a majority of the people in the community who have some degree of hearing loss. *Second*, so that the members of a community will be able to understand what is proposed and have an opportunity to participate constructively in any changes.

The essential elements of an appropriate communication plan are outlined below.

Communication planning with Indigenous people living in remote communities

-  Be aware that Indigenous people who appear very shy, as well as those who speak English less well and have lower literacy levels than their peers probably have a hearing loss, and may be easily 'shamed' by problems that arise as a result of their communication difficulties.
-  Take care to limit the level of background noise, or move somewhere quieter to make it as easy as possible for people to understand you.
-  Develop and use visual flip charts, pamphlets and DVDs as an aid to communication, instead of just talking at people. This is especially important when presenting unfamiliar ideas and new information, or proposing new ways of doing things.
-  Where possible, create opportunities for people who may have a hearing loss to observe others and what others do before they themselves must participate in an activity.
-  Use multi-stage communication processes so that information can be 'passed around' among the people within a community or meeting. This means, for example, allowing time for discussion breaks during meetings so that information can be relayed to those who may not have fully understood what was said.
-  Do not expect an immediate response. Time for discussion will give people time to understand the issues, what has been proposed, and form an opinion.
-  Where possible use interpreters and communication brokers selected by the people you want to talk to. People with more severe forms of hearing loss may only be able to communicate effectively through family members who know them well.
-  Adhere to local cultural communication protocols when planning meetings, passing on information, and seeking feedback. Indigenous people with hearing loss will find communication even more difficult when faced with unfamiliar cultural processes.
-  Use amplification equipment. Different equipment will be needed for group situations and as an aid to communication with individuals. *Contact Dr Damien Howard on (08) 8948 4444 for information on appropriate types of devices.*

For more information on communication planning and / or the social and communication issues associated with conductive hearing loss contact: damien@phoenixconsulting.com.au