

The CAMA Connection

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LINKING MUNICIPAL PARTNERS – PROMOTING LITERACY AND LEARNING



CAMA
Literacy Project
Since 1993

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Want to communicate more effectively? Use clear language!

CAMA and its partner, CUPE, have been promoting clear language for a number of years. In 2005, they commissioned a survey of clear language initiatives across Canada. What did they find? First, not many municipalities have taken up the clear language challenge. Some municipalities provide clear language training for staff on a fairly regular basis; some have undertaken projects to revise by-laws or public information. In a couple of cases, the municipality has worked with its unions to begin drafting workplace material in clear language. However, the study also found that clear language initiatives are rarely evaluated and they are usually not sustained. They come to an end when staff changes, budgets are cut or government priorities shift.

In 2006, CAMA and CUPE decided to do more to encourage municipalities to adopt plain language for communications with the public and the workforce. They cooperated to produce *The Clarity Kit: Effective Communications for Municipalities*. The Kit is the first publication that brings together, in one place, a number of tools to help municipalities promote, plan and carry out clear language initiatives. You can order *The Clarity Kit* in French or English from the CAMA Web site – www.camacam.ca/programs_language_init.asp

This issue of **The CAMA Connection** focuses on clear language – what it is and why it's important for municipal communications. It gives an update on the City of Toronto's clear language project, which won the 2007 *CAMA Award of Excellence for New Workplace and Community Clear Language Initiatives*. It reports on clear language workshops presented by CAMA and CUPE in Halifax and Moncton in November 2007. And it provides the **Top 10 Clear Writing Tips** to help you get started with clear language.

And if that's not enough, we also introduce you to the **Learners' Council** – a group of five people who have some innovative ideas about how to promote municipal literacy programs. We'll be hearing more from them in future issues.

What is clear language?

Clear language is an approach to communication that puts the reader first – not just some readers but everyone who needs the information. This approach also focuses on action – what you want your readers to do with the information you are providing.

What are the most important components of the clear language approach?

- **Knowing your audience** – Who are you writing for? What's their level of reading skill? How much time are they likely to spend on reading this document? How important is the issue to them?
- **Knowing the purpose of your document** – What's the most important information? What do you want readers to do after they have read the document?
- **Choosing language and a writing style and that suits your readers.** Good communications help readers get the information they need quickly and easily.
- **Using visual aspects of communication, such as type, formatting, and graphics, to help readers get the message.**

Clear language is not about "dumbing down" – it's about writing for your audience.

How do Municipalities Benefit from Clear Language?

- 1) Because clear language makes information more accessible, it enables a municipality to **reach a broader range of people** with its public communications, including those who have low literacy levels, those whose first language is not English or French, and people who have visual or learning disabilities.
- 2) By providing clear communication to citizens about the services they pay for and the issues that affect them, municipalities **improve transparency and accountability**. Citizens are more likely to understand why and how decisions get made. They may feel less excluded from municipal affairs.
- 3) Clear communication in the workplace can have a huge impact on the **quality of working life** for municipal employees at all levels. It may save time by making processes more efficient. It may improve labour/management relations by preventing misunderstandings. And, if health and safety materials are written clearly, they can prevent accidents and even save lives.

Part 2 of *The Clarity Kit* includes case studies that demonstrate the benefits of clear language. In one very successful initiative, the Los Angeles County local government worked with clear language consultants to revise the scripts for an automated telephone system providing information about small claims court. The number of calls needing personal attention went down from 5,000 per month to 3,500. Employees had more time to deal with complex problems and callers spent less time on the phone. Improved customer service is always appreciated!

What does Clear Language Look Like?

Consider the example below. Which version gets the ideas across more clearly?

Before

In the event that a holiday occurs on a Saturday or a Sunday the following working day(s) shall be considered the day(s) in lieu. Employees working on either or both days shall receive premium pay on either one of the days worked. If employees prefer days off in lieu of time worked on designated holidays, it shall be by mutual consent (see section 5.01.02). In the event a designated holiday is coincident with an employee's day off, the employee shall be allowed the next scheduled working day as a day off without pay.

After

If a holiday falls on your regular working day, you will get that day off with pay.

If a holiday falls on your regular day off, you will get the next working day off instead.

If you work on the holiday, you will be paid at 2X your regular rate of pay.

Northlands Park, Edmonton and CUPE Local 30

For other examples of how clear language can improve communications, see Part 2 of *The Clarity Kit*.

Before

On commencing employment, all employees will be given a job description which outlines their areas of responsibility. Job descriptions should not be viewed as boundaries for one's tasks and initiatives but as guidelines as to what the job entails.

After

Employees will receive a job description when they begin work. Use this as a guideline to understand your job responsibilities.

Implementing Clear Language – Successes and Challenges

The City of Toronto received a *CAMA Award of Excellence* in 2007 for initiating the first city-wide clear language campaign in Canada. Led by the City Clerk's office, the project focused on making written material for Council meetings easier to read and understand. Clear language consultants developed a new reporting format and resource material. They also developed and delivered a clear language training program for staff. What are the results ten months later?

The CAMA Connection asked **Robert Mackenzie**, the Project Coordinator, about the project's successes and challenges.

Overall how many people completed clear language training? What job categories were involved?

Nearly 1,000 people participated in the training program. Most participants were supervisors, managers and directors who write reports. A few administrative assistants also took part. They are often the key people who format reports or co-ordinate what goes from the divisions to the City Clerk.

What has happened since the training ended?

The City's Human Resources Division plans to incorporate clear language into its ongoing training courses. Once HR has chosen the trainers, we will meet with them to make sure that the course meets our objectives. In the meantime, I have been delivering the training package to small groups of staff.

How have staff reports going to Council changed?

Staff are generally writing clearer recommendations and using the summary sections of the new report form well. Some staff have not given up their old habits and still write summaries that are 10 to 20 paragraphs long, but they are the exception. Staff are generally introducing recommendations with an active sentence – "Transportation Services recommends that ..." instead of the old standard – "It is recommended that..."

How are you evaluating progress in the staff's use of clear language?

Evaluation has been an issue for us. We have targeted Grade 12 as the ideal readability level for report summaries and recommendations. But staff are not able to assess the readability of their draft reports accurately because the Word 2002 program, which the City uses, has a flaw in its readability tool. We have looked for some kind of "patch" to deal with this problem but so far have had no luck.

The City plans to install Word 2003 for all staff during the next year but in the meantime, it is only available on a few work-stations, including mine.



Trainer Greg Ioannou (Colborne Communications) explains clear language principles to City of Toronto staff.

I have been evaluating changes in the reading level of reports to City Council and standing committees by selecting a random sample of recent reports and comparing them with the 2006 analysis. I have looked at the readability of the summaries alone, the recommendations alone and the complete reports, excluding attachments. Although many of the reports read better than previous samples, I have not found that readability levels are significantly different from the previous year.

At the same time, I have found that recommendations are clearer and can stand alone. This makes it easier for City Clerk's staff to report the activities of meetings in minutes and decision documents. We have also found that some senior level managers have been strong champions of the project, promoting the use of clear language in their own divisions.

What are the next steps? What lasting benefit do you expect from the clear language project?

I will continue to measure the readability of reports and communicate the target readability standards to report writers through regular communications. Once more staff have an accurate desktop readability tool, we may begin to require divisions to check the readability level of reports before they send them to us. We will report regularly to the senior management team on the use of clear language. Regular reports should help to increase the profile of the project and may influence all communications from the City to the public.

Top 10 Clear Writing Tips

- 1. Know your audience and purpose.**
 - How well does your audience read? How much time do they have?
 - What do you want them to do?
- 2. Organize from the reader's point of view.**
 - Focus on the information readers need to know.
 - Make it easy to find important information.
- 3. Use headings and sub-headings to organize information and show what is important.**
- 4. Use bulleted lists to break up text.**
- 5. Speak directly to your readers.**
 - Use familiar words and phrases.
 - Don't change verbs into nouns.
- 6. Use strong active verbs.**
 - Active sentences make it clear who is responsible.
 - They sound less bureaucratic and cut down on words.
- 7. Explain specialized language.**
 - Avoid unnecessary jargon.
 - Avoid or explain technical terms.
 - Spell out acronyms.
- 8. Keep sentences and paragraphs short.**
 - Focus on one idea per sentence.
 - Aim for a maximum of 20 words per sentence.
 - Start a new paragraph for each topic.
- 9. Don't let the design get in the way.**
 - The design must be right for the audience and the purpose of the document.
- 10. Test your document before you print it.**
 - Read the text out loud. Listen for difficult language and long sentences.
 - Test with colleagues.
 - Test with typical readers if possible.

Coming Events

CAMA Awards of Excellence for Municipal Workplace Literacy and Learning Achievements

March 14, 2008

Final day to submit applications by e-mail to Patricia Nutter at pnutter@lincsat.com.

Original applications should be sent to:

CAMA
PO Box 128
Fredericton NB E3B 4Y2.

For award categories and detailed information on how to complete the application, go to:

www.camacam.ca/programs_award_about.asp

Clear Language Workshop

April 21, 2008

Spruce Grove (AB) CAMA and CUPE will present this workshop for municipal managers, employees, union members and community groups.

For more information about anything that appears in this newsletter, please contact Patricia Nutter at (613) 264-0111 or pnutter@lincsat.com

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Clear Language Workshops Sponsored by CAMA and CUPE – A Big Hit!

Sue Folinsbee, Evaluator

Seventy-six people, including municipal managers, staff, CUPE representatives and others from the community, participated enthusiastically in clear language workshops in Halifax and Moncton in November 2007. Participants came from more than eleven different municipalities, and four CUPE locals.

During the action-packed one-day workshop, participants learned:

- what clear language is and why it's important
- what makes material hard to read and understand
- how to write any document more clearly

Participants put their learning into practice by revising examples from municipal communications and contracts.

Positive evaluation from participants

All participants rated the workshops highly. They appreciated the clear language tips and strategies, and the hands-on practice. Participants also enjoyed networking with people from other sectors who brought new ideas to the discussion of how to communicate effectively.

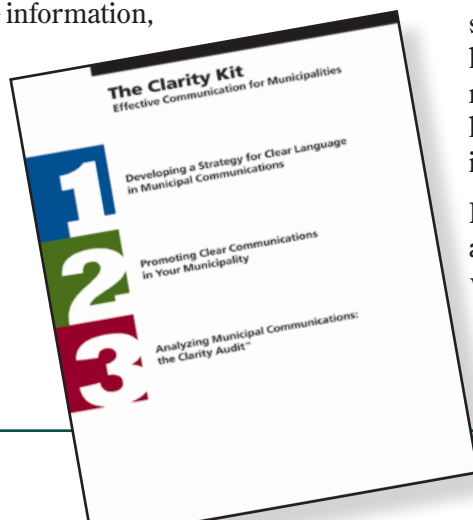
Municipal managers found the workshops “excellent, informative and educational.” CUPE representatives stressed that what they learned about clear language will be useful both in their union work and their jobs. Almost everyone said that they will consider using clear language for a wide range of documents such as policies, community newsletters, collective agreements, union communication and information that goes to the public.

Applying clear language at work

CAMA and CUPE have developed a systematic, joint process that management and unions can use to assess the need for clear language and develop a strategy to begin using it. For more information,

check out the highly-rated *Clarity Kit*, now available in English and French from the CAMA Web site –

[www.camacam.ca/
programs_language_
init.asp](http://www.camacam.ca/programs_language_init.asp)



CAMA Learners Council Holds First Face-to-Face Meeting



Seated left to right: Bill Bailey (Winnipeg), Robert Melanson (Moncton), Kristi Nelson (Grande Prairie)
Standing: Rob Snyder (Kingston), Sue Folinsbee (evaluator), Mary Ellen Belfiore (facilitator), Patricia Nutter (Project Director), Terry Bennett (St. John's)

Success! That was the way the five members of the Learners Council described their first face to face meeting in December 2007. The one-day meeting allowed Council members to get to know one another – first by sharing personal and learning experiences, and then by working together to plan the Council's work. Members appreciated the fact that everyone's ideas were respected during the meeting.

Council members are workers/learners from St. John's, Moncton, Kingston, Winnipeg and Grande Prairie. When they shared their experiences about getting back to learning, they discovered they had a lot in common. They all had faced similar fears and roadblocks. Taking part in a learning program had been beneficial for everyone – on the job, in their union and at home. People were proud and confident about their achievements.

In planning the Council's future work, members agreed that promoting workplace learning to other municipalities should be a priority. They want to show the benefits of learning and share programming ideas from different municipalities. Council members were clear that workplace learning programs work best if they address workers' interests both on and off the job.

By the end of the meeting Council members had achieved a lot. As one person said, “Look at all we have come up with by working together.”

The Learners Council is looking forward to bringing a new voice and a different view to the CAMA literacy program.