

Kari Robideau:

Do you know how to effectively communicate with stakeholders? Thank you for tuning in to the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development podcast series. My name is Kari Robideau and today we're going to learn about tools that can help you explain the impacts of the youth development program you work with to key financial stakeholders. I'm joined in this conversation today by two of my colleagues who will share their insights on this topic. First, Sam Grant, our evaluation director and secondly, Erin Kelly-Collins, our communications specialist, both at the Center for Youth Development. Thank you both for joining me today.

Sam Grant:

Thanks for having us on.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Glad to be here.

Kari Robideau:

We'll start with the two of you telling us a little bit about yourselves and I think specifically your experience with communicating with program stakeholders and give us the why you are interested in this time.

Sam Grant:

All right. First, this is Sam and I serve as our evaluation director and evaluators spend a lot of time thinking about data and collecting data and so not surprisingly, we want other people to pay attention to the data that we collect. We want people to read our reports and make changes because of the evaluations that we're doing. So we care a lot about communicating with financial stakeholders because we want to be able to have them make changes and make better decisions about their programs and where they spend their money. And as the director, I can say youth workers that I work with will often call me maybe a week before, maybe an hour before they have a big meeting with their stakeholders and they want to be able to talk about the impact of their program. And it's often too late at that point, especially if it's an hour before. You just can't pull together a high quality report that says why Awesome County 4-H is the best program ever. Some of this training Erin and I are doing is really trying to be proactive to think about how can you be intentional about the ways that you communicate so you're not caught at the last minute, that you're scripting and thinking and building a case for the programming that you're doing. So that's my story. And Erin brings in another perspective with communications.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

So true. This is Erin and I have spent about six years really paying attention to the ways that we can most effectively communicate with financial stakeholders. Prior to stepping into this role as our communications specialist for the Center for Youth Development, I worked on the development team for extension and really focused on financial stakeholders of the 4-H program. And that gave me a lot of time and opportunity to listen to financial stakeholders, find out what they cared about and helped me to craft a pretty deep understanding of how and why to communicate program impact to these important stakeholder communities.

Kari Robideau:

So both of you have a stake in this topic and your input is so valuable to youth workers. And I'm going to go back to something Sam said often, we don't think about it until, Oh, I should have this information to report right now. Let's start first with who are we reporting to and why should we communicate with them? So you talk about stakeholders help us to define as youth workers, who those stakeholders are and where do we start?

Erin Kelly-Collins:

So there are a lot of stakeholders for every single youth development program that exists. Within the Center for Youth Development, one of our significant program that works directly with young people is called 4-H and there are a multitude of stakeholders. There are the young people themselves who participate in our programs. There are the families, caring adults who are connected to those young people. You also have organizational leaders, volunteers, observing community members. There's just so many stakeholders. A unique community of your diverse stakeholders is your financial stakeholders, people who are going to contribute dollars to support the actions of the youth development program. And those folks are unique. They have wants and needs that are different from any other stakeholder group that you might be working with. And so finding ways of communicating effectively with them is really important because at the end of the day, they're the ones who will either further empower your program through financial support or pull some power away from you and impacting the lives of young people.

Sam Grant:

So with that, we care about that group obviously because they give us money. But we've also seen from the Minnesota 4-H program that those financial stakeholders can be some of your greatest champions for your program when they're behind your program. So making sure that they're happy with the program and they're seeing the impacts that you want to be seen. They're often well connected within communities that they serve and can, again serve as that cheerleader for your program and help others to learn about your program and learn why maybe other people should be funding it.

Kari Robideau:

So these stakeholders really need to know and value your program and they will do that. But if you don't tell them, it sounds like what you want them to value and know about your program, then they may be communicating something differently.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Oh my gosh, that's so true, Kari. We see that all over the place. Oftentimes when we as youth workers are so embedded in our programs, we expect others who are not embedded in our programs to understand them in the same way we do. And oftentimes that's just not the case. Our financial stakeholders don't get to be as hands-on as we are. They don't get to see inside the way that our volunteers do, the way that we as staff members do. And so finding ways of communicating the value, the impact of our program in ways that are meaningful for our financial stakeholders, that's really important and it helps them to better be connected and really, really believe in and champion the value that we bring to the table.

Kari Robideau:

Okay, so I'm convinced now we need to give reports to, we need to show impacts to our stakeholders. You guys have tips for us as youth workers who are not as highly skilled in this area. We're really good at working with young people. We're not as good at evaluating and writing reports. And you have mentioned the training that the two of you do and that's something that, after this podcast, people can connect with you on and to learn more. But right now, give us some tips. Let's start with the writing and presenting to stakeholders. It wasn't in my job description to write and present to stakeholders. How do I, where do I start? How do I do this?

Sam Grant:

So we have a bunch of tips about how to best write and present to your stakeholders. And we see with our staff that oftentimes you like one of these better than the other. So maybe you really like writing and getting your message where you can think about it for a long time and have someone edit it. And sometimes you love to sit around a table with a group of your financial stakeholders and talk about your program. Maybe bring a young person into the program and share about the good work that you're doing. So we're going to talk a little bit about both of those. But one really easy thing is to focus your messaging. So we get really excited and passionate about the work that we do in youth work and we want to tell about everything that we're doing. We want to try to focus our messages. So you're talking about a single thing. We've been working with the Center for Youth Development with the message that 4-H girls, true leaders. And so we're bringing that message out throughout the state to talk about how is 4-H building leadership skills and young people? So our first tip is to focus your message.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Another tip that we have is to keep it simple and it's very connected to the first tip that that Sam was suggesting. Oftentimes we can get into a lot of details connected to our program and the impact that it's having. If we had an event that really connected young people to meaningful leadership opportunities, oftentimes we want to tell all of the things about that program. And oftentimes that's not meaningful for the financial stakeholder to read or to hear about, and so the more we can simplify our message, really clarify and get down to what is most important for them to understand and connect it to their values and interests, that is really going to enhance the effectiveness of either a written or an in-person report.

Sam Grant:

Another tip we can share is to practice giving that presentation. If you're doing an oral presentation, run through it a couple of times. Even if it's in your car on the way to the meeting, you're getting a little bit of time to script it, to practice it, especially practicing that intro so you can hook them in right from the beginning and if you're writing, have editors. Have editors, read your work, give you critical feedback. Like Erin was talking about, when you want to have all the information and you know that you have to simplify an editor can help you to pull out the information that nobody cares about or maybe an editor can look at it and say, "I have no idea what that word means", because we often use jargon within our program that we understand because we're within our program, but outside people have no idea what those acronyms mean. So an editor could be a friend, a colleague, your mom, your 15 year old son, whoever works out for you to have an editor to read and give some critical feedback really helps to up the value and the sophistication of your reporting.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

I also would suggest, I want to really echo the editor or the someone else, who can listen to you as you prepare for a verbal report. I am a paid communicator. 100% of my job is to develop meaningful and compelling messages and I make mistakes in my content every time I write. And so there are a few key people around, Sam is one of those people in my life who I can give writing to or do a mock presentation for, and I trust that she will give me feedback, that she will notice my errors, that she will make me better. So finding the one or two people around you who will be critical friends can really make a difference in the quality.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

The last step that we want to give in the area of writing and presenting is about preparing ahead of time for the hardest questions. This is something that Sam taught me a few months back and I have seen it really do wonders for the staff that we've worked with. There's one staff member in the Southwest region who we worked with last fall and she talks specifically how helpful this was. She is really involved in a county fair within her community and some key financial stakeholders, one or two in particular, always directed presentations to the number of animals that were involved in the fair and she really wanted to talk about the young people who are building skills to lead for a lifetime.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

And so rather than just ignoring that question or not preparing for it, she took the time to prepare a really short side report that was all about the animals that were exhibited at that fair and before the presentation, she was smart enough to give it to that financial stake holder who she knew was going to derail her presentation. It answered their question. It attended to their needs so that she could focus her message so that she could communicate simply and it was because she had time to practice and get some critical feedback that she was actually prepared for that. The hardest of questions.

Kari Robideau:

Those were really helpful tips and I think things that we can take and go with and they seem feasible and they seem like something that I can do, but a question I have is, how do I know what the message is that those stakeholders want?

Erin Kelly-Collins:

That's a great question. Thanks for bringing that up Kari, because an important tool that we oftentimes encourage our colleagues to use and that we ourselves use when we are trying to get to know a new stakeholder group is something that we've developed together called a stakeholder analysis. It's, it's a one-page document that we use but it's actually just four questions that we'd be happy to share with you today. And oftentimes we think we know what someone else is looking for, but when we actually walk ourselves through these four questions, we discover that we don't know our financial stakeholders quite as much as we could or perhaps should.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Those four questions are really simple. What does my stakeholder care about or most value? What do they want or need to know? Who is my stakeholder reporting to or accountable to? And what do you need them to know, believe, or better understand? It's so funny because I oftentimes, even doing this work 100% of my job, I oftentimes will skip this step and go straight to my reporting and not take the time to pause and really identify what it is my stakeholders are looking for and why they're looking for

those things. And so taking that time early on has really proven to enhance the quality of the report for that particular stakeholder audience.

Sam Grant:

And it says also a really great thing to involve your whole team in the discussion of. So if you're part of an organization with multiple people, you all bring a different perspective of what those financial stakeholders need and value and what you want them to know. And so it can be a really great conversation for you to have at a staff meeting so you can start to think about more intentionally what that group needs. And it's also a place that maybe you don't know what they want or what they care about. We say have a conversation then and start to create that dialogue of finding out what they do care about and value because you might find that the things that you thought they wanted to know more about, they actually don't care about and it's just that one volunteer who wants to know about the animal count at the county fair. But when you have that conversation then a big group you may be will come to some different ideas than you were working with in the past. So it's a tool that you can use alone with your team and with those stakeholders that you're working with.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

I will say that of all the staff who we have worked with in this area of effective reporting for financial stakeholders, within Minnesota and outside of Minnesota, this is the number one tool that we get positive feedback on that this intentional analysis of the needs of the financial stakeholders has been a game changer for people who are trying to communicate with them in more effective ways.

Kari Robideau:

Can you walk us through an example of a group that worked through these questions and the answers that they gave to them and how it was helpful to them and moving forward?

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Yes. So last fall we worked with a team of staff members from 10 different counties across Minnesota and this was a tool that we introduced to them early on in our cohort experience. We were together for four and a half months and we asked each of those members to take some time to go through it themselves and try to figure out what they knew so far and what kinds of questions they had. And we heard back from several of those staff members that they were so confident ahead of time that they knew the answers to the questions. And when they actually needed to sit down and write the answers, they found themselves questioning or being less confident.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

And so there is one staff member who I'm thinking of who is sits in central Minnesota and she said that she actually took a couple of her financial stakeholders out for coffee and just ask them the questions and she was so surprised by how candid they were and how grateful they were to be asked what they cared about and it actually a difference in the content that she provided in the subsequent reports and conversations that she had with those stakeholders.

Kari Robideau:

If I'm interested in utilizing this tool, how can I access it?

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Well, if you're a staff member within the center for youth development, it's available in our intranet, but if you, Kari, have shown notes that are available publicly, we could certainly share a sample of this tool that could be modified for local use regardless of where your listeners are located.

Kari Robideau:

Okay. We will do that and they can always contact the two of you for more information. Okay, so I know you guys have one last tip that is a bit of a secret ingredient to all of this, above and beyond what you've already shared. And this tip will help us improve and ensure that we have effective reporting.

Sam Grant:

Yeah. We think we've found the secret sauce of reporting. And in those reports for finding three elements are really important to work with the wide spectrum of financial stakeholders that you might be working with. And so those three pieces are data, a story and a quote. And so having those three pieces helps to make sure that everyone's needs are met. So the data is for those people that want the numbers, want the hard facts, want to know what does that look like in comparison to the bigger group, that person that's always asking those data-related questions. So 90% of young people gained leadership skills during 4-H camp might be the data that you're sharing. And then the story is where you help that data come to life.

Sam Grant:

We've found that storytelling is a way that you make your program real, that you make it about a young person in the program and you help to draw readers into what you're talking about. And then we also think having a quote from maybe a young person or a volunteer or whatever the story is about, helps to cement and draw out a piece of that story that often can, if someone's just scanning and they see that data point, they might not read through the whole story, but then the quote maybe draws them and says, Oh I actually do want to read that story because that quote is very interesting.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Yeah. The same sauce works for visual presentations as it does for written presentations. So oftentimes we can get into a pattern in our verbal presentations and even with our slide decks of lots and lots of data over and over and over again, or a summary of every single event that we've offered. And those kinds reports are not sticky. And the whole point of giving information to our financial stakeholders is to help them to feel so positive about their financial investment, that they want to talk about it and they want to continue it. And so it's got to be sticky.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

It's got to be something like that will actually stay in their brain, that will go with them as they leave the meeting or put your report in the recycling bin and move on with their day. We want that information in some way to stay with them. And so if you include those three items that we have found are very effective and increase the stickiness of your visual, of your verbal or of your written reports, it's more likely that more of your financial stakeholders will remember. And we'll talk about it in the future. So it's the data point, the story, and then a quote from a real life person who has been impacted by that program.

Kari Robideau:

And those secret ingredients create a super sauce that is not only delicious, but something that our financial stakeholders want to hear and use.

Sam Grant:

And they want more and more and more of it.

Kari Robideau:

They want more and more. You two have shared now why it is so important to bring our financial stakeholders along with us and to make them informed of the data, the stories, the quotes we want them to reuse. What other impacts are you seeing from this? You know, in addition to them being more aware of who we are and being able to communicate more effectively about our youth program. Beyond that, what are the impacts you've seen?

Erin Kelly-Collins:

You know, Sam and I are not the only people who have really built strong skills in this area of communicating with financial stakeholders. We've got some incredible colleagues across Minnesota who have been doing this work for a long time and with enormous effectiveness. One of the ones that I'm thinking of works in Northeastern Minnesota and she has this amazing ability to understand the unique needs of the financial stakeholders that she works with and she has been able to support the staff in her communities to tailor their messaging, to build trust with those colleagues over time with those financial stakeholders over time in their written reports, in their personal interactions with their stakeholders. And the results are incredible. She has been able to just in one particular county that she works with increased staffing from one staff member to four staff members. Imagine the impact on young people when there are more staff who are empowered financially and with meaningful youth development experience to be able to reach young people and empower them with skills to lead. That's the potential that exists when we effectively communicate with our financial stakeholders. Yeah, it's worth it. It is worth our time.

Kari Robideau:

Well Sam and Erin, I want to thank you for sharing this information in this podcast today and for helping us, not only think about identifying who our financial stakeholders are, but giving us tips on focusing and simplifying a message so that they can connect it to their values as well and use that information to also help communicate about the program and obviously there are impacts that make all of this worth it.

Erin Kelly-Collins:

Thanks for making time for us. It's been great to talk about this.

Kari Robideau:

Would you like to learn more about the Center for Youth Development? Please visit our website at [www.extension.umw.edu/youth](http://www.extension.umw.edu/youth). There you will discover research, training and events and you can also check out information on our Minnesota 4-H program, read and also comment on the youth development topics covered in our youth development insight blog. That will wrap up this podcast today. My name is Kari Robideau, joined by Sam Grant and Erin Kelly-Collins. From the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development, please tune in again soon.