

Step 3: Find a respected champion at work

Get that person to support your project.

- Is your plain language project changing an important form used by 100 nurses in a hospital? Try to win the support of a respected nurse supervisor.
- Is the goal to simplify a letter informing thousands of veterans each year that their claim for vocational benefits has been accepted? Enlist the help of a long-time claim manager who is popular and respected on the floor.
- If you have an insider on board who truly supports the project, he or she will be a far more effective agent of change than you. You're the outsider, after all.

Besides having the influence of an insider-sponsor who can reassure others that your plan might work, this person is in a position to:

- Help you make good choices about who to involve.
- Fill you in on the history of how the problem document developed in the first place.
- Alert you to the inevitable land mines, such as the person who wrote and believes in the offending document, the change-resistant manager, or the worst time of year for starting new projects.
- Explain how the document or web page needs to sync with other parts of the process, such as programming or an attached document.

Agency Insight

One of my first plain language projects was to create clearer form letters sent by claim managers to workers, employers and doctors in workers' compensation cases. It was a proposal I made to the program, rather than the other way around. Ultimately, it was approved because the agency director was a big plain language supporter. But the project never really took off. I hadn't selected a specific project they were motivated to undertake. What's more, the timing was wrong. The busy program was in the midst of many other changes that had to take precedence. I hadn't done my homework.

About five years later, many other programs in the agency had begun to embrace our "Plain Talk" initiative. Also, a new director signed a plain language policy. This time, the claims program was ready. Key managers in the program were supporting the idea. It developed a training plan and established its own successful team of experienced claim managers who've rewritten scores of form letters and now welcome my occasional help. Because they are respected insiders, they get regular feedback about what needs fixing.

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