Advanced Communications

Engaging Leaders, Elected Officials, and the Public

TRIBAL TRANSPORTATION & PUBLIC WORKS

July 28: MUTCD Overview: Key Updates and Practical Implementation
Aug 12: Pavement Management: Practical Strategies for Tribal Roads
Aug 20: Speed Management: Engineering, Education, and Community Engagement
Sept 15: Succession Planning: Building Organizational Resilience
Sept 20: Advanced Communications: Engaging Leaders, Elected Officials, and the Public

Today’s goal

Communicate so the right people understand the issue, the decision, and what happens next.

1. Understand

Read the audience, context, history, and decision environment.

2. Translate

Turn technical detail into concise, decision-ready information.

3. Engage

Listen, respond to difficult questions, and build credibility over time.

Communication is successful when the audience can act—not when we have said everything we know.

Why advanced communication matters

- Technical expertise does not automatically create understanding or support.
- Leaders often need a recommendation, tradeoffs, timing, and consequences—not the full technical history.
- Community members may bring lived experience, prior commitments, distrust, or information you do not have.
- State and federal partners may use different terminology, timelines, and decision processes.
- A strong communicator protects accuracy while making information usable.

The communication equation

MESSAGE + MESSENGER + CONTEXT = IMPACT

The same facts can land very differently depending on who delivers them, when they are delivered, and what has happened before.

01

PART 1 • READ THE ROOM

Start with the audience—not the slide deck

One issue. Five audiences.

Tribal Council / elected leaders	Decision, options, risk, community impact
Executive / program leadership	Resources, coordination, timing, accountability
Community members	What changes for me? Why? When? How can I be heard?
Technical staff / partners	Methods, standards, constraints, responsibilities
Media / broader public	Accurate headline, public impact, verified facts

Before you communicate, answer six questions

1. Who is the audience?

2. What do they already know?

3. What do they care about?

4. What decision or action is needed?

5. What could create resistance or confusion?

6. Who is the right messenger?

Know the decision environment

Authority

Who can decide?
Who advises?
Who implements?
Who must be consulted?

Timing

When is the decision needed?
What deadlines are fixed?
What can wait?
What happens if we delay?

History

What has been promised?
What happened before?
What relationships matter?
What sensitivities exist?

Quick exercise: Same project, different message

Scenario: A culvert replacement will close a community road for three days.

2–3 MINUTES

Tribal Council

What do leaders need to know before approving or supporting the plan?

Community

What do residents need to know to plan and understand the impact?

Partner agency

What technical, schedule, and coordination information matters?

02

PART 2 • TRANSLATE

Turn technical detail into decision-ready information

The decision-ready briefing

A reliable structure for council, leadership, and executive conversations.

1	**ISSUE**	What is happening?
2	**WHY IT MATTERS**	Impact on safety, service, cost, community, or obligation
3	**WHAT WE KNOW**	The few facts needed to understand the issue
4	**OPTIONS / TRADEOFFS**	What can we do, and what comes with each choice?
5	**ASK / NEXT STEP**	What decision, direction, or action is needed?

Lead with the headline—not the history

LESS EFFECTIVE

"Back in 2023 we began looking at the pavement condition data, and then we had a consultant review several segments..."

DECISION-READY

"We need direction today on whether to repair or replace the failing section. Replacement costs more now but reduces repeat closures."

Plain language without losing precision

TECHNICAL	PLAIN + PRECISE
“AADT has decreased 18% YOY.”	**“Average daily traffic is down about 18% from last year.”**
“The asset is functionally obsolete.”	**“The facility still works, but it no longer meets current needs.”**
“We are awaiting environmental concurrence.”	**“The environmental review is not complete, so construction cannot move forward yet.”**
“The countermeasure has a CMF of 0.72.”	**“Research suggests this treatment can reduce the targeted crashes by roughly 28%.”**

Use numbers that answer a question

Give context

Not just “$850,000.”

Try: “$850,000—about $210,000 above the current budget.”

Use comparisons

“12 crashes” means more when paired with exposure, severity, trend, or a relevant baseline.

State uncertainty

Separate measured facts, estimates, assumptions, and what is still unknown.

The “so what?” test

FACT → **MEANING** → **IMPACT** → **ACTION**

“The bridge inspection found section loss” → “capacity is reduced” → “heavy vehicles may be affected” → “we need to post, repair, or further evaluate.”

Exercise: Build a 2-minute council briefing

Scenario: A grant-funded road project is 15% over estimate and the bid window closes in two weeks.

Draft five lines:

- Issue
- Why it matters
- What we know
- Options / tradeoffs
- The ask

Challenge yourself:

- No more than 2 minutes
- No unexplained acronyms
- Lead with the decision
- Be ready for “What happens if we do nothing?”

03

PART 3 • ENGAGE UNDER PRESSURE

Communicate when the conversation is difficult

When people are upset, facts alone rarely solve the conversation

Listen first

Let the person finish. Identify the concern beneath the wording. Avoid planning your rebuttal while they speak.

Acknowledge

Recognize impact or concern without agreeing to facts you cannot verify or commitments you cannot make.

Respond + follow through

Answer what you can. Be explicit about what you do not know, who owns the next step, and when they can expect an update.

A practical response framework: L-A-R-N



LISTEN

What is the actual concern?



ACKNOWLEDGE

Name the concern or impact you heard.



RESPOND

Give the clearest accurate answer you can.



NEXT STEP

State what happens next, by whom, and when.

Useful language for hard moments

When you do not know

“I don’t have that answer with me. I can verify it and get back to you by ___.”

When information is disputed

“Here is what our current records show. If you have different information, I’d like to understand it.”

When options are limited

“These are the constraints we cannot change. Here is where we still have flexibility.”

When you made a mistake

“We gave you the wrong date. The correct date is ___. Here is what we are doing to prevent another mix-up.”

What not to do

- Overwhelm people with data to “prove” they are wrong.
- Use acronyms, policy language, or process as a shield.
- Promise an outcome before you know it can be delivered.
- Argue about intent when the concern is impact.
- Say “that’s not my department” without helping identify the right next step.
- Wait for perfect information when a timely holding update would reduce confusion.

Misinformation: correct without amplifying

1. Lead with the accurate fact	“The road will remain open to local traffic during construction.”
2. Briefly address the incorrect claim	“A post suggesting a full two-week closure is not accurate.”
3. Give the source / next update	“The current schedule is posted at ___. We will update it Friday if conditions change.”

Scenario practice: Public meeting question

“You already decided what you’re going to do. Why are you asking us now?”

Use L-A-R-N to respond.

What can you acknowledge? • What facts matter? • What is genuinely still open for input? • What happens next?

04

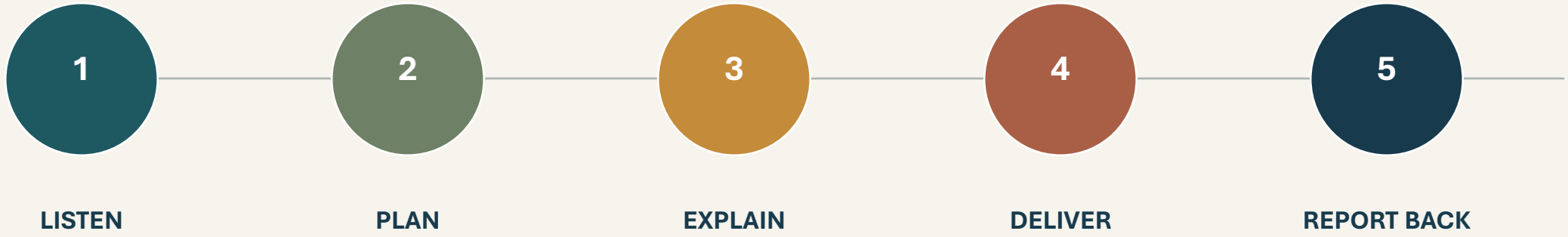
PART 4 • RELATIONSHIPS + CREDIBILITY

Build trust before the high-stakes conversation

Credibility is built in small moments

Accuracy	Say what you know—and distinguish it from what you think.
Consistency	Do what you said you would do, including updates.
Transparency	Explain constraints, uncertainty, and changes.
Respect	Listen to expertise, lived experience, protocol, and community knowledge.
Presence	Communicate before there is a problem, not only when you need approval.

Engagement is not one meeting



Close the loop: “Here is what we heard. Here is what changed. Here is what did not change—and why.”

Choose the channel intentionally

Face-to-face / meeting	Nuance, relationship, sensitive issues
Email / memo	Record, detail, decisions, follow-up
Text / alert	Urgent, short, action-oriented updates
Website / social	Broad access, repeatable public information
Visual / map / photo	Location, sequence, change, impact

When communicating across governments

Clarify roles

Who owns the decision? Who owns the funding? Who owns the road or asset? Who communicates publicly?

Respect sovereignty + protocol

Treat Tribal governments as governments. Learn the Nation’s preferred processes, titles, protocols, and points of contact.

Document agreements

Summarize decisions, responsibilities, deadlines, and unresolved issues so partners leave with the same understanding.

Prepare for the question behind the question

“Why does this cost so much?”

Can you show value, alternatives, and what drives cost?

“Why wasn’t I told?”

Was the communication timely, accessible, and sent through the right channels?

“Is this safe?”

What risk exists, what evidence do we have, and what are we doing about it?

“Why can’t we just…?”

Which constraints are real, and which choices remain available?

Your communication plan: 5 minutes

Choose a real conversation you have coming up.

Audience: Who needs to understand or decide?

Outcome: What do I need from them?

Headline: What is the first sentence?

Evidence: What 2–3 facts matter most?

Concern: What question or resistance should I expect?

Next step: What happens after the conversation?

Seven habits of strong communicators

- Start with purpose and audience.
- Lead with the headline.
- Translate jargon; preserve accuracy.
- Connect facts to meaning, impact, and action.
- Listen before responding—especially under pressure.
- Say what you know, what you do not know, and what happens next.
- Close the loop and follow through.

Clear communication is a form of leadership.

People do not need every detail. They need the right information, from a credible source, in time to understand, decide, and act.

Questions + discussion