

The One Water Council's Leadership Guide #1: **Being an Effective One Water Communicator**



The Leadership Challenge

One Water approaches can outperform traditional water management methods, but bringing them to life requires getting others on board and grappling with the systems geared toward existing siloed practices.

Champions who successfully enlist others to implement One Water approaches are skilled at overcoming common barriers, namely:

- Communicating about One Water approaches and benefits
- Designing and maintaining cross-sector partnerships
- Navigating siloed regulatory systems and funding sources to pave the way for more innovative and holistic programs and projects

The One Water Council is proud to present three interconnected guides designed to help practitioners and leaders enhance their effectiveness at solving complex water and community challenges.

CHECK OUT THE OTHER GUIDES IN THIS SERIES:

- » [Guide #2: Designing and Maintaining Cross-Sector Partnerships](#)
 - » [Guide #3: Navigating Regulatory Silos and Building Toward Flexibility](#)
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Acknowledgments

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One Water Communication Fundamentals

This first guide offers practical skills for any One Water champion to craft and deliver effective messages that reach and resonate with key audiences—whose support and actions can make all the difference.

Though we use the word "audience" throughout these guides, we recognize that One Water communication is a two-way exchange more akin to communicating with a colleague, partner, or another collaborator. Partnership is a key theme throughout this series, and we encourage you to think of your communications as a two-way exchange that can lead to or bolster partnerships.

When using this guide, we encourage you to remember:

- **There is no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating about One Water.** Since One Water is an approach that can be applied to a wide range of challenges with diverse partners, no single definition or set of talking points will work in every scenario. Effective communication requires thoughtful planning: get to know your audience, understand what motivates them, and tailor your message to align with their goals.
- **Messages must be clear and relatable.** Your audience may not share your background or expertise, so use plain language, real-world examples, and practical connections to make new ideas more accessible and engaging.

While these fundamentals may seem simple, One Water is inherently complex, covering diverse issues, needs, and audiences. Because of this, generic messaging is often ineffective.

Rather than offering boilerplate language, this guide serves as a call-to-action resource to help you strengthen your leadership skills in communicating about One Water solutions. By developing intentional and effective communication skills, you can build support, nurture collaboration, and prevent misunderstandings that could hinder progress.

Six Skills to Become a More Effective One Water Communicator

One Water champions can hone six key skills to become effective messengers in any scenario.

Skill 1 / Cultivating Vision and Clarity of Purpose

Before communicating, understand your overarching goal and how taking a One Water approach can deliver outcomes beyond traditional methods.

Skill 2 / Strategic Partnership Design

For the most effective partnership, begin by considering the key individuals and groups needed to achieve your goal beyond the usual "go-to" partners.

Skill 3 / Understanding and Advancing Others' Interests

Effective communication requires understanding your audience's true interests—both explicit and unstated.

Skill 4 / Framing the Messages

Not all messages resonate—effective communication requires intentional framing to fit the audience.

Skill 5 / Effective Delivery

The impact of your message depends on how, when, and by whom it is delivered.

Skill 6 / Honest Evaluation and Adjustment

Effective communication is an ongoing process that requires flexibility and adaptability. Build a feedback loop into your communication strategy to stay responsive and adjust as needed.

Skill 1: Cultivating Vision and Clarity of Purpose

Before communicating, understand your overarching goal and how taking a One Water approach can deliver outcomes beyond traditional methods.

Practice This Skill with “Headlining”

Clear your head and reflect with a blank slate, then write a headline for how things will be different in a year if your idea succeeds. Next, analyze this headline across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. What are the strengths and weaknesses in each area? How does a One Water approach bolster strengths and address weaknesses? Highlight the most vivid points.

YOUR THOUGHTS HERE:

Skill 2: Strategic Partnership Design

When communicating about One Water, your audience is often someone with whom you want to partner to advance your goals. For the most effective partnership, begin by considering the key individuals and groups needed to achieve your goal beyond the usual “go-to” partners. Often, crucial stakeholders are overlooked, including those who must approve decisions, amplify your message, or positively or negatively influence outcomes. Consider:

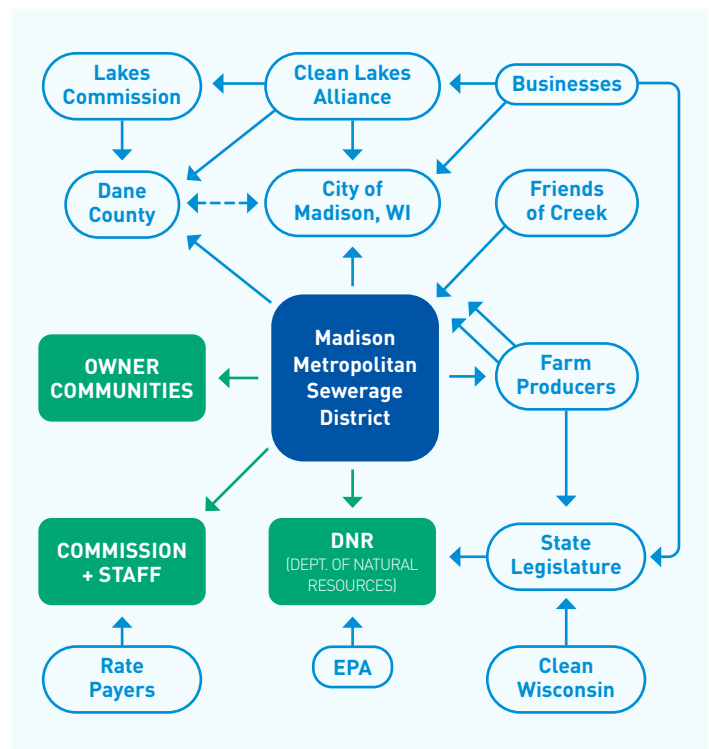
- **Desired impact:** What do you need each partner to do, believe, feel, or support to achieve the goal?
- **Trusted messengers:** Who can open doors and build relationships?
- **Timing and sequencing:** Who should hear your ideas first? When should others be involved? Consider the timing that matters to both your audiences and to yourself.
- **Channels and formats:** What channels and formats will be most effective for each audience?

Practice This Skill with Relational Diagramming

Map out all the people and organizations that may have an interest in, could support, or could hinder your effort. Use large circles to represent major influencers or decision-makers and smaller circles for others. Draw lines to indicate relationships and influence between them. This exercise can help you prioritize your communication strategy, including the order and methods for outreach.

Figure 1:
Relational Diagram of Yahara WINS partnership depicting the array of stakeholders and organizations involved and how they are linked and influence decisions.

■ Decision makers ■ Project leader □ People/Orgs impacted



Skill 3: Understanding and Advancing Others' Interests

Effective communication requires understanding your audience's true interests—both explicit and unstated. While organizational goals may be clear, personal values, preferences, and perceptions are often hidden—even from the audiences themselves. Recognizing these deeper drivers allows you to craft empathetic, collaborative messages rather than falling into competition or defensiveness.

Practice This Skill with Direct Pre-Engagement

Begin by having direct, informal conversations with each key audience to uncover their hopes, needs, and concerns. Focus on their personal motivations (people engage for their own reasons—not yours). Supplement these discussions by reviewing their strategic plans and publicly stated priorities in advance.

Build Trust by Examining Key Factors: Trust is not automatic; it must be developed intentionally, especially when engaging a new audience or building a partnership. Consider how you can assess and strengthen the following core elements of trust:

- **Motive:** Partners believe in shared success over self-interest
- **Respect:** Each audience member and future partner feels understood and believes their priorities are valued
- **Sincerity:** Audiences believe what you say is genuine
- **Competence:** Each party has confidence in the other's ability to fulfill commitments
- **Reliability:** Each party believes the other will follow through on commitments, even amidst challenges

Want to take it further? [Check out WEF's work on trust in the context of the circular water economy.](#)

Skill 4: Framing the Messages

Not all messages resonate—effective communication requires intentional framing to fit the audience. A well-crafted message aligns with your audience's interests and decision-making style, using data and proof strategically rather than overwhelming your audience with information. Examples of impactful data include cost-benefit analyses, efficiency metrics, success stories, and community impact graphics that tell the story about anticipated environmental, public health, livability, or prosperity benefits.

Developing and testing various messages—especially before important or costly communications efforts—is highly recommended. Message testing through mechanisms like paid A/B testing or focus groups targeting your end audience can demonstrate how effective a particular framing is at achieving your intended goal. When time or resources are limited, even modest outreach to ask for feedback can prevent missteps and allow you to assess how your message is received and adjust accordingly.

Practice This Skill with Message Triangle Exercises

Message triangles help structure effective communication by prompting you to consider essential message components in a concise and logical sequence. Identify your main messages and frame them as you would when addressing your audience, tailoring the message to resonate with their interests. Before you begin, have a clear understanding of what you are/are not willing and able to communicate.

- **Core Belief or Value:** Start by stating a belief or value that your audience shares and will connect with emotionally.
- **Problem Definition:** Clearly define the problem in a way that is relevant and motivating to your audience.
- **Solution Statement:** Outline the solution, including what you want your audience to believe, feel, or do to address the problem.
- **Vision or Payoff:** End with a compelling vision of the future, i.e., what success will look like and how it will be valuable to your audience.

Once you address each aspect of the message triangle, you will have created a compelling and concise message tailored to your audience.

Sample Message Triangles for Common Use Cases

The One Water Council created the following message triangle examples to address three common scenarios where One Water champions must communicate to advance One Water.

Example 1: Political Buy-in for Cross-Departmental Planning. To secure a mayor’s support for engaging municipal department heads in collaborative capital planning and delivery, a champion might say:

“Water is vital to the local economy, community health, and the recreation opportunities that make this place home to every resident. But managing water to meet these needs is becoming increasingly difficult—especially when departments managing water resources (i.e., water, sanitation, parks, and transportation departments) operate in silos. Your leadership can unite department heads to collaborate on solutions, strengthening our city’s water management. Other communities using this approach have seen significant cost savings and increased public trust by addressing community priorities more effectively.”

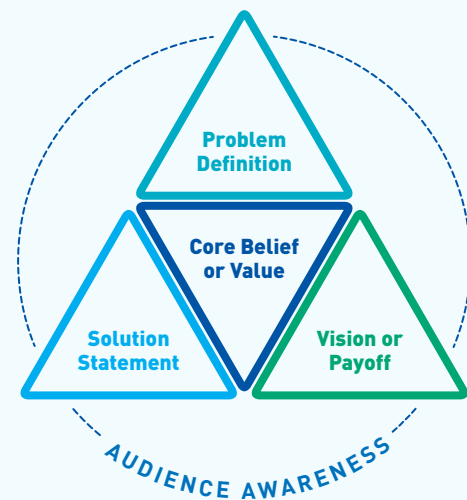
Example 2: Staff Buy-in for Internal Collaboration and Innovation. An internal champion aiming to promote teamwork and innovation across department silos might tell their colleagues or bosses:

“We all work here because we care about protecting water resources, helping our community thrive, and making sure essential services are affordable for our neighbors. But our job is getting harder with challenges like aging infrastructure, resilience needs, regulatory demands, and limited resources. We need to plan infrastructure, investments, and asset management holistically—bringing representatives from multiple departments together to streamline processes, foster innovation, and save money for our community. Collaboratively, we can steward resources well, deliver additional benefits, and earn the public’s trust in our ability to meet their needs.”

A real-world example of this type of message comes from Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (NEORS). NEORS’s Member Community Infrastructure Program helps communities struggling to design projects, secure funding, and implement construction to reduce sewer

Figure 2:

Message Triangle diagram showing how each component contributes to audience awareness.



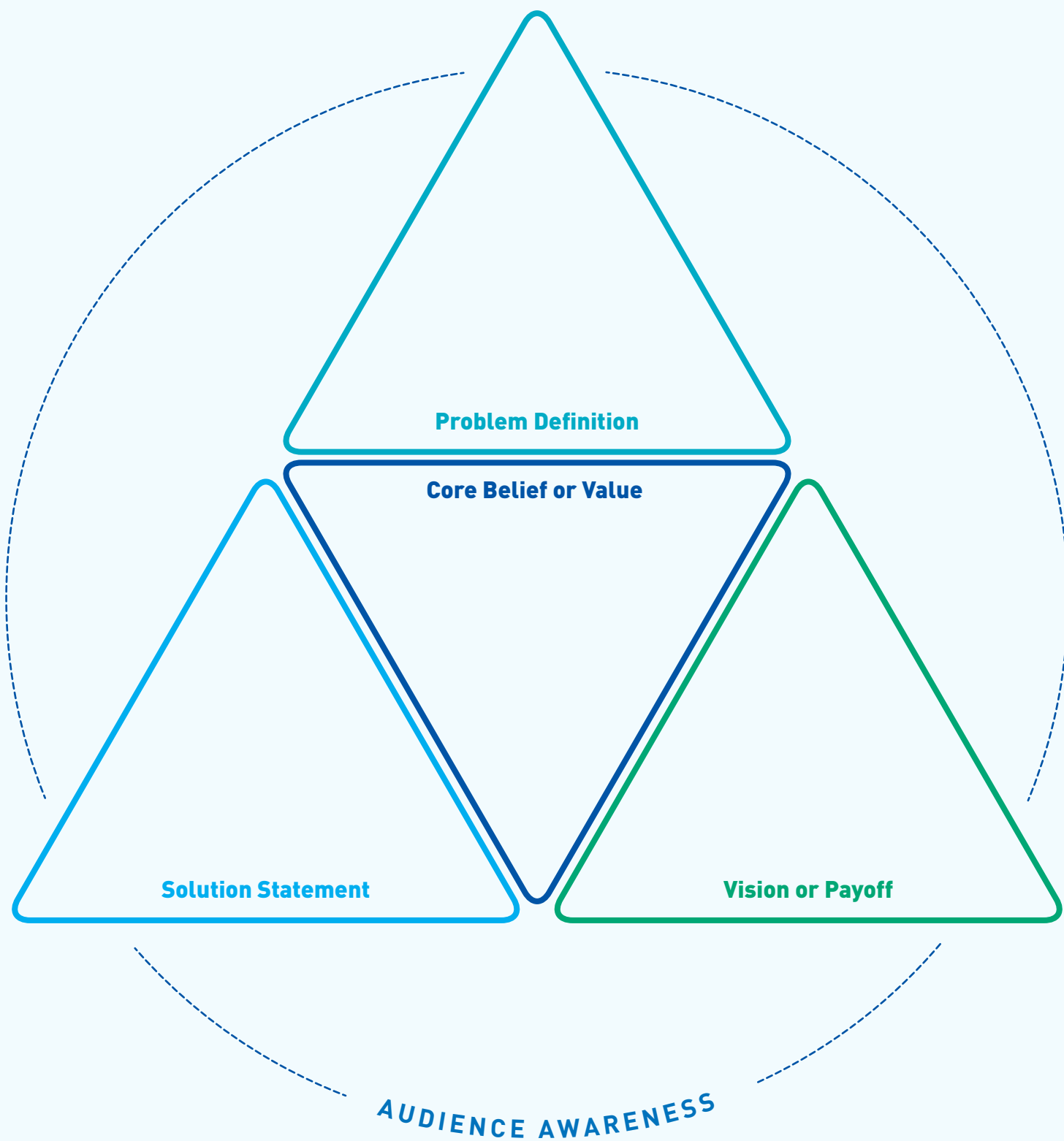
overflows and basement backups. While it’s uncommon for regional wastewater and stormwater authorities to play such an in-depth role, Jeanne Smith, Director of Administration and External Affairs, shares that NEORS staff are motivated by messages like this:

“We all want to protect public health and the environment in a fiscally responsible way. While regional system improvements are underway, many local systems and municipalities face challenges with infrastructure maintenance and upgrades—which is causing basement backups and localized flooding. By offering grants and our expertise, we can help our municipal partners secure federal and state funding and oversee projects. This approach complements our regional efforts and enhances water quality for everyone.”

Example 3: Explaining One Water Approaches to the Public. When communicating with the public to inspire action and build support for collaboration, a champion might use a message like:

“We can all agree that water is essential to our health, the economy, and the places we love. But our water faces increasing and complex threats, and we can no longer afford to take water for granted. Securing our water’s future will require all of us to work together to value and steward water at every stage of its cycle—from faucet to drain to stream. If we come together for water, we can lay a strong foundation to support the health, resilience, and prosperity of our entire community and region.”

YOUR MESSAGE TRIANGLE HERE:



Skill 5: Effective Delivery

The impact of your message depends on how, when, and by whom it is delivered. Consider the following:

- **Timing:** Is your audience present and available, and do they have the capacity to engage?
- **Communication Channels:** Identify the most effective platforms including traditional media (e.g., print and TV), non-traditional media (e.g., social media and other digital platforms), and community engagement opportunities (e.g., events, meetings, and speaking engagements)—or a strategic combination of these.
- **Message Format:** Tailor your format to suit the channel. For example, a two-minute pitch to a decision-maker requires a different approach than an infographic.
- **Messengers and Validators:** Refer back to your relational map to determine who the most effective messengers and validators might be. Spend time preparing them to amplify your message.

Practice This Skill with Dry-Runs

When verbal communication is involved, practice is essential. Presenters can record themselves or rehearse with colleagues to refine clarity, tone, body language, and readiness for follow-up questions. This preparation will boost confidence and ensure your message is delivered effectively.

YOUR THOUGHTS HERE:

Skill 6: Honest Evaluation and Adjustment

Effective communication is an ongoing process that requires flexibility and adaptability. Build a feedback loop into your communication strategy to stay responsive and adjust as needed. Think ahead about how to respond if a message doesn't resonate or falls short of expectations. Communication takes practice and persistence; staying engaged and adaptable will pay off.

Practice This Skill with Check-Ins

Hold brief, informal check-in meetings with your audience to assess how the message was received. These conversations can reveal confusion, misunderstandings, or areas needing further clarification. Use this feedback to refine your messaging and approach and follow up as necessary.

Final Thoughts

The responsibility for effective communication—and for understanding the key interests of your audiences—ultimately rests with you. While team members can offer input, those championing innovative One Water approaches must own the message and lead the communication efforts. Remember, clear and effective communication builds trust over time, making collaboration and long-term success more attainable. Effective communication is a personal process that thrives on genuine connection; when you speak authentically and from the heart, you strengthen the foundation for collaboration. Empathy plays a powerful role in helping you connect with others and better understand their needs and perspectives. By committing to the skills outlined in this guide, we advance One Water's inclusive nature—bringing others into the movement to help guide a more sustainable water future for all.

One Water, One Future.

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