

Developing Communication and Engagement Skills in the Public Health Workforce across Cheshire and Merseyside Evaluation Report August 2012



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Background

Findings from the recent ChaMPs stakeholder insight report 2012, (which sought to ascertain the views and perceptions of different stakeholder groups across the NHS and local government, (regarding the current level of understanding of Public Health) found that there were several issues with regards to Public Health communication including: *“The majority of respondents rely heavily on public health professionals to deliver the quality of public health information they need to perform their roles effectively. Short falls between the type, content relevance, quantity and quality of public health information currently received and the kinds of communications they need now and in the future, are clearly evident. Therefore, as the key mediator between health and non health organisations, developing a comprehensive targeted communications strategy is essential.”*

As a result of these findings it was agreed that a collaborative approach was needed to develop some effective engagement and communication skills within public health teams locally. As a consequence, the workforce programme within ChaMPs was tasked with commissioning appropriate skills development training.

Please [click here](#) to read the executive summary of the ChaMPs stakeholder insight report

Introduction

At a time of organisational change and the need to establish new effective working relationships there has never been a better time to develop and hone effective communication skills. Within a current climate of shrinking resource, smaller teams and increased demand to deliver; storytelling skills enable individuals to communicate in a way that is engaging, meaningful and most importantly memorable.

Storytelling skills have been successfully used in the corporate world for some time by organisations like the World Bank and a number of leading corporations around the world. Steve Denning who has written a number of books on the subject says *When it comes to inspiring people to embrace some strange new change in behaviour, storytelling isn't just better than the other tools. It's the only thing that works.* 'His view is backed up by Harvard's Brian Boyd's book, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*, (Harvard University Press, 2009).

Storytelling skills are seen as a way of reducing jargon in the workplace and ensuring that key messages are easy to understand and grab people's attention. Storytelling skills can help with:

- Communicating memorably
- Engaging people's imagination
- Bringing out the best in others
- Grabbing and keeping people's attention
- Accessing skills that will increase creativity to allow a person to create new and imaginative ways of communicating with people and allow a person to challenge stereotypes and perceptions in a fun and productive way.

On behalf of the Cheshire & Merseyside Directors of Public Health, ChaMPs commissioned North West Employers to provide storytelling workshops in each of the Cheshire & Merseyside Public Health Directorates.

Workshops were delivered between March and July 2012 by Richard O'Neill, a North West Employers associate and subject matter expert in storytelling. Richard has been delivering these types of workshops for the past 5 years and previous clients such as the Imperial War Museum in London; Save the Children and York and Stoke City councils have benefited from these workshops.

Workshop sessions lasted for one day, hosted within the participating organisation and delegates were asked to prepare for the workshop by reading the Directors of Public Health's key messages document and think about how they could incorporate these key messages into their own areas of work.

Delegates were then asked to bring along a couple of pieces of work / projects that they were responsible for in order to develop them into a public health story / message during the course of the workshop.

Pre-assessment workshop questionnaire

Prior to attending the course delegates were asked to complete a brief questionnaire outlining their reasons for attending, learning objectives and any particular requirements that they may have had. It was encouraging that word had spread about the workshops between events and delegates were actively asking to attend.

See below:

What is your broad objective in attending this course?

Recommended to attend by a colleague: Public Health Intelligence Analyst

Are there any other points you feel would be useful for me to know in developing the course?

I may not know others on the course but I was really keen to access this training, and grateful to be able to attend.

Evaluation of workshop sessions

Delegates completed a post event evaluation on the day and were also contacted again two weeks after the final workshop had been delivered in July 2012 in order to ascertain if and how delegates had in fact used the learning as a result of the workshop sessions.

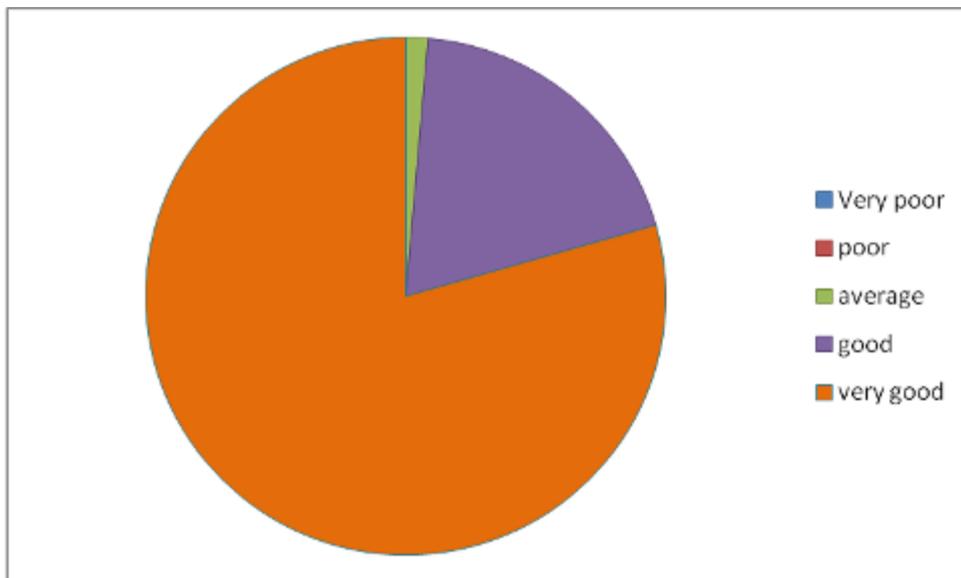
The workshops provided public health teams the opportunity to come together to develop their communication skills in a fun and dynamic way that was participative and judging by the feedback, a refreshing change!

In total 91 delegates attended by 10 different organisations. Results are outlined below. Owing to demand one locality area has requested a further workshop session for staff.

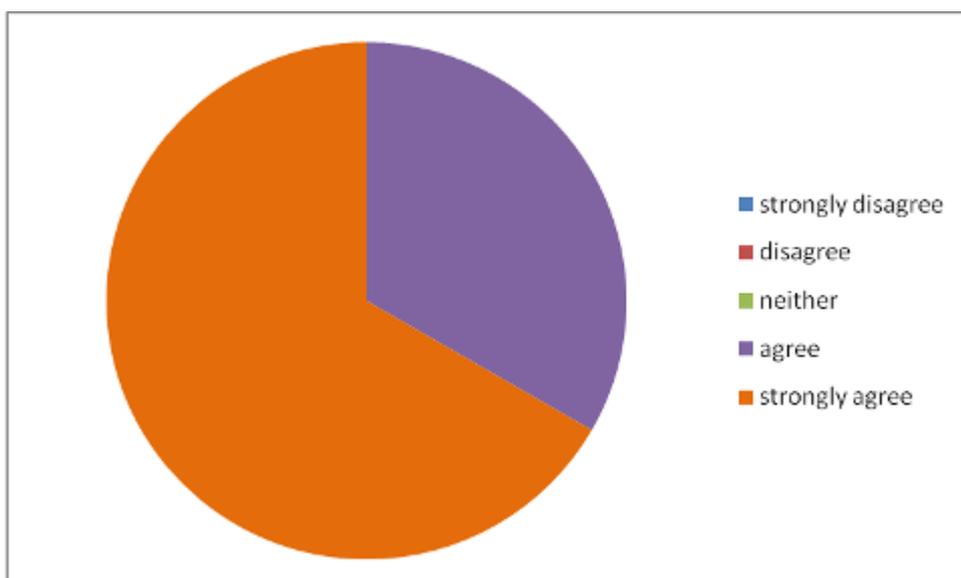
Evaluation findings

	Total number of delegates attended
Total number of workshops	
10	91

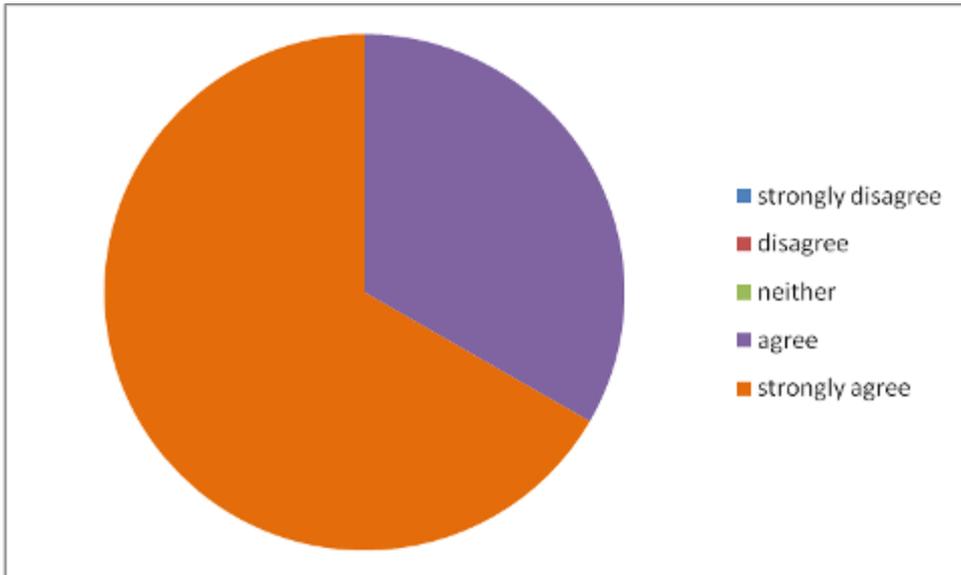
How do you rate the content of the event overall event?



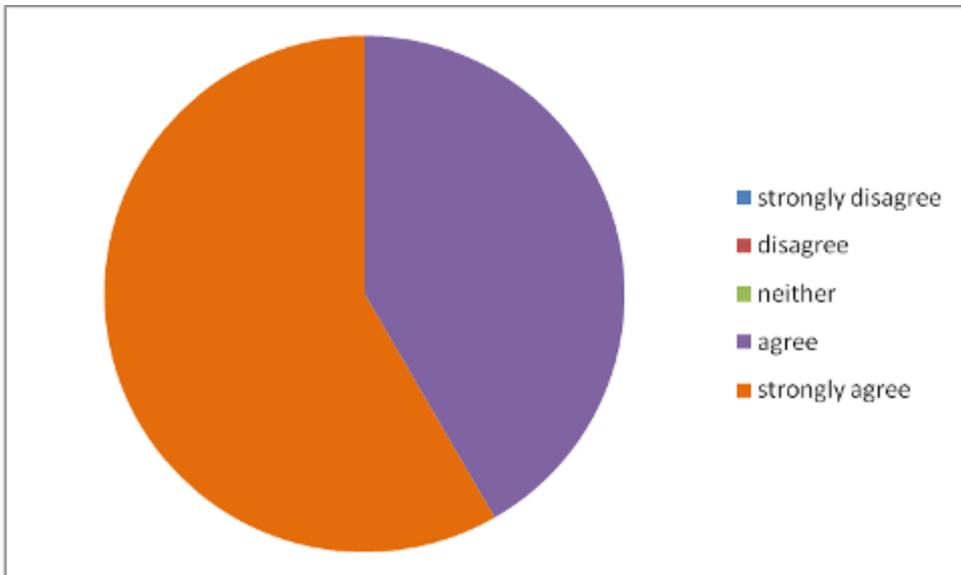
I have learnt a lot as of today's workshop event



I was stimulated as a result of today's workshop event



I will change/modify my practice as a result of today's workshop Event



What did you find most useful?

- Approach of building up from personal to work examples.
- Application of learning.
- Practising the storytelling.
- The synopsis of the positive aspects of people's different storytelling styles.
- Actually telling a story to the group using the tips.

What did you find least useful?

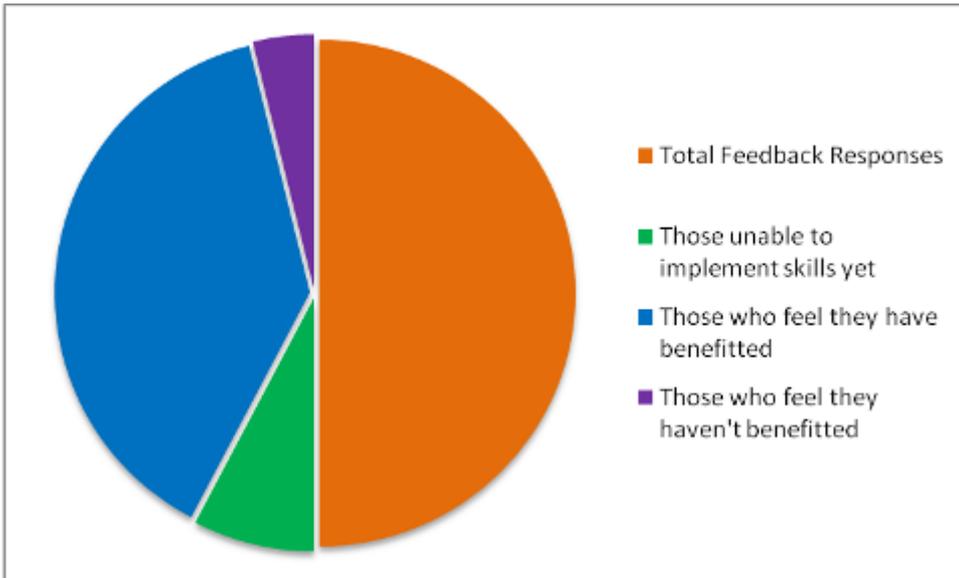
- Handouts. I prefer listening.
- Personal storytelling.
- One of the feedback sessions was a bit long.
- Some of the one to one work could have been a little shorter.

As a result of this storytelling workshop event, how will you modify your practice?

- Be more confident using this method.
- Use confidence gained to engage with colleagues in a more interesting way.
- To not rely on power point in the future.
- Promoting our service to organisations and service users.
- I like the idea of the storybook – I will modify my presentation technique. I will also try to incorporate more stories.
- I will look at my work and identify stories that reflect and work best.

Post workshop feedback: Putting storytelling skills into practice

Once all of the workshops had been delivered, qualitative feedback was sought in order to assess how people valued the sessions and used the skills within their own sphere of practice.



Of those delegates that responded to the final post event follow up survey 10% agreed that they had gained new skills and had indeed implemented them within their own organisations and roles.

Qualitative feedback to post event survey

Outlined below are the questions and qualitative feedback received from those that responded to the survey.

The context that you used the storytelling skills in, for example a meeting, a presentation, a conversation etc.

- Meeting and in conversation and I will use it in presentations.
- One suggestion from the workshop was to gather stories of people's experiences. I have been listening to staff talking about their experiences of engaging with the NHS as patients or carers. I was struck by how much information we hold collectively. We remember when services do not deliver what we expect or people talk to us or family members in an inappropriate way.
- Speaking at a conference. Some of us have a habit of telling tales, so this training helped to build on those skills, refining them to make sensible contributions to presentations of complex issues.
- It has reminded me to use the approach in meetings and conversations – I haven't done any presentations since, but will use it there.
- Used for explaining vaccination to parents and in presentations to health care professionals, it is a useful system for any area of work where need to provide an explanation of something.
- Presentation at a national conference with local government.

The tips/techniques that you used, for example sharing a personal experience, developing your 2 minute lift conversation, using some of the 7 top tips for storytelling such as avoiding jargon, making an impact, being honest etc.

- Definitely the 7 top tips during training that I am delivering.
- I think being made to articulate what you actually do in your job at the start of the session was the most useful aspect, instead of hiding behind the jargon we so often use. I have used this to question other people – it is not always comfortable!
- Turning a number of unconnected thoughts into a connected story that makes sense to a listener, in a way which enables the listener to understand the lesson which is being provided.
- I particularly valued asking permission to relay a story and using multiple layers to actively engage audience into the learning through storytelling.
- Personal experience and using plain English, not jargon are the key tips I now use. Also using common cultural references like soap operas, film characters etc.
- Engaging audience – being gentle with them, avoiding technical language, sharing a personal experience, using an analogy.

Having “had a go” at a storytelling approach how did it feel? What was the response from your audience/individual? Was it a positive experience? Did you experience any difficulties/problems with this approach?

- It's really stuck in my head to make sure to use plain English and to not be scared to explain things clearly using basic language. Also using common language and characters e.g. in soap operas. People respond well and immediately feel comfortable.
- Was useful to test it out with a sympathetic audience (team!) in first instance and was also lucky to be able to work through initial ideas from the day. This meant I was able to test out how some of the ideas might land with the specific audience. Got really good feedback after the conference – both from a number of individuals in audience following up with me on the day and afterwards and also from people who hadn't been there, but I had had feedback from colleagues who were.
- I found the experience easy to deal with as I had used similar skills before but never knew it was called storytelling. I also had some written notes to be able to recap from, which were useful with bullet points.
- It was a positive experience as I felt this way I often use storytelling techniques – I just didn't class it as storytelling until I attended the workshop!
- It was a workshop that allowed experiential learning and therefore I engaged with it completely. I enjoyed the opportunity to relay my stories and to actively engage with the audience. It was a very positive experience and whilst I have yet to present at a board meeting, I have thought more about how I can relay a message differently.
- It felt good, because it required a certain amount of clear thinking and planning to make sure it made sense. The response from the audience was satisfying, particularly as they were able to empathise with what was being put across, especially if it was an issue which they did not often have need to think about themselves.

Will you continue to develop your storytelling? Would you recommend this approach in your sphere of work? Do you feel more or less confident to try these approaches?

- Yes, it is a way of making things memorable, so I'll use it again.
- Yes and yes, I do feel more confident to try these approaches.
- I have recommended the workshop to several colleagues and requested that Cumbria and Lancashire PH Network consider adding this to the list of training opportunities to be considered. I will continue to identify stories of the NHS. I feel much more confident in being about to hold the attention of an audience.
- Yes I will continue to develop my storytelling and would recommend it.
- Yes I will continue to use and to advocate, but I don't think I would call it storytelling as I think that could put some people off and also a lot of the course content is not just specific to storytelling, but can be used across lots of areas. I feel more confident to use aspects of this approach.
- I would use the approach within my work, however there would have to be times when I would only use other methods depending on the audience I was speaking too.

The above quotes demonstrate some really positive qualitative feedback that was echoed by **Dr Janet Atherton, Director of Public Health, Sefton:**

“I found the storytelling workshops a refreshingly new way of putting across the work we do in Sefton in a simple and memorable way for different audiences – and recently got positive feedback when I put these skills into practice at a national local government conference. It was also good for team development at a time of great change – to reconnect with why we do what we

do and feel confident to tell our story with pride. I would certainly encourage organisations to invest in this type of learning for staff as an effective means of developing memorable communication skills”.

Feedback from storytelling expert

Richard O'Neill – storytelling workshop leader

I was delighted to be asked to create a tailor made storytelling skills course for ChaMPs especially as the initial interest came from a recommendation from previous work. Storytelling is about talking but is also about taking action which is what ChaMPs did in going for something like storytelling which is still a fairly new concept in organisations in the UK..

My main contacts were Alison Farrar and her colleague Tracey Lambert who were both very clear about what they wanted from storytelling and gave me as much help and support as they could to create the correct course for the delegates. They also made sure that the whole ChaMPs team attended a full day course too.

What made the process really interesting and rewarding was that delegates were actively encouraged to give their honest feedback which was crucial in making sure that anything in the course which wasn't useful was removed and anything required was included. This was done on a continuous basis and as such we ended up with a much better course.

I really enjoyed the diversity of the delegates not only from all of the different geographical areas but also from different disciplines and across the different organisations. It was especially encouraging to see so many directors getting as involved in the courses as other delegates. Another exciting part of the work was to see people during the course already starting to use storytelling to communicate more simply with each other and creating stories that were free from jargon allowing them to be understood and enjoyed by a wide ranging audience.

I found all of the groups I worked with despite working in a climate of great change and uncertainty really came along with a desire to learn and to put into practice what they had learned. I also found that running so many courses over the three months allowed me to reflect on what I was delivering to keep improving and to develop some brand new methods and elements. It was also very interesting how many people had 'heard good things' about the course from colleagues who had already been on it, the positive stories had gone out which is exactly what I hoped and to me demonstrated the true power of storytelling.

One of the most exciting things to come out of the courses was the consensus about creating and developing a bank of 'Success Stories' which could be used by people working in public health. I'm really looking forward to seeing if we can improve not only the understanding of public health but also allow staff and public to celebrate the many successes and milestones achieved locally and nationally.

*The only thing I would have changed would have been some of the venues as they were a little small for our needs, but the delegates coped brilliantly and didn't let it impact on our work. And after all, as storytellers we need to be able to perform our stories in a variety of venues and if we waited for the perfect venue we may wait a long time.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn following both immediate post event evaluation and longer term follow up conducted two weeks after delivery of the final workshop session:

- Storytelling workshops have been well received and attended by public health teams across Cheshire & Merseyside.
- The majority of attendees found they had learned a lot and would consider using storytelling tools and techniques as a result of attending the workshops.
- Written feedback from attendees also suggests that the practical approach within the workshop sessions was well received and overall that the sessions were valued by those that attended.
- Story-telling methodology was well received by the public health community in Cheshire and Merseyside and considered a valued learning experience.