RURAL SAFETY & HEALTH ALLIANCE

Work, Health & Safety (WHS) Communications Guidelines

About these guidelines

The WHS Communication Guidelines aim to help research and development corporations (RDCs) and industry associations within the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector to communicate with flair and impact to improve WHS outcomes.

These guidelines were developed through extensive consultation with industry and government stakeholders, and close integration of the research literature.

The guidelines are organised around five key factsheets that concentrate on communication activities:
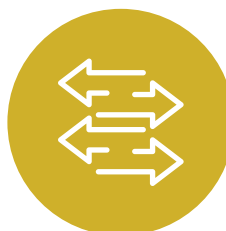
RAISE AWARENESS

LEARN FROM INCIDENTS

REINFORCE BEST PRACTICE

PROMOTE CHANGE

MANAGE A CRISIS

Foreword

The things we talk about are important.

The past few years have seen plenty of talk about important things, like soil, technology, consumer trust, traceability for safety and provenance, animal welfare, environmental stewardship and more. Important things drive our priorities, our investments, and our behaviours.

Yet we don't seem to talk as much about people, the most important asset in farming and fishing.

The Rural Safety and Health Alliance have recognised two challenges in the way we talk about the health, safety and wellbeing of people.

First, we see an opportunity to communicate MORE about the health, safety and wellbeing of people as a priority for sustainable primary production. Second, we see an opportunity to communicate more CLEARLY about why and how health, safety and wellbeing fits into the bigger picture for producers and the sector as a whole.

Unfortunately, the consistently high rates of death, injury and illness in primary production reinforce in very stark terms that this is a priority for the entire sector. What we talk about influences what we think is important, and that in turn, influences how we work. Communication is not a silver bullet for change, but it is a big part of the positive change we have the opportunity to make.

As an alliance of Rural Research and Development Corporations, we also acknowledge that we have a role as leaders, amongst many other leaders in the sector. This guide describes 'influential role models', which we seek to be.

Whether you are from an industry association, working in government, an extension officer, a farmer or a fisher, you might be too.

This document is a helpful resource for anyone who wants to communicate that the health, safety and wellbeing of our people is a priority worthy of our attention. It encourages us to think of health, safety and wellbeing as an integral part of our messages and the way we work, not an afterthought. It sharpens our focus to learn – not just from failures (incidents) but from success. It prompts us to reinforce best practices with case studies and credible sources. It helps frame our messages whether we are supporting everyday practice change or responding to a crisis.

The Rural Safety and Health Alliance is taking action to improve health, safety and wellbeing outcomes across the sector through targeted research, development and extension investments. This leverages cross-sectoral commonalities to deliver more relevant, more efficient, and more effective outcomes for the entire sector.

The Rural Safety & Health Alliance Management Committee

The Rural Safety and Health Alliance

The Rural Safety and Health Alliance is a cross-sectoral collaboration comprising nine Rural Research and Development Corporations: AgriFutures Australia, Australian Eggs, Australian Pork Limited, Australian Wool Innovation, Cotton Research and Development Corporation, Dairy Australia, Fisheries Research and Development Corporation, Grains Research and Development Corporation, and Meat and Livestock Australia.

How to use these guidelines

The intention of these guidelines is to provide general advice and a starting point for crafting impactful communications about work, health and safety (WHS) across the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry.

The document is organised into five sections that each represent different purposes for communicating about WHS with your audience. Each section shows the key questions and considerations you should make when developing WHS messages. These should be used as a general starting point.

Some general principles to consider as you implement these guidelines include the following:

Influential role models are critical

It is important to be clear of the commitment and expectations around being a role model upfront.

The role of peers and influential others in persuading people to change is critical. Identify key role models that people respect and look up to, and partner with them as spokespeople and sponsors of WHS messages.

Provide best-practice examples for others to follow

Providing examples of ways that others have engaged in WHS activities will **give industry the confidence it needs to improve**. Ensure best-practice examples are detailed, and relevant. Use stories to draw out real life examples and provide the context behind why the change was done, how it was successful, and what benefits flowed as a result.

Use social pressure to your advantage

Social norms or expectations of others to engage in WHS practices can be a powerful motivator. Humans are social beings, and so the perceived pressure of 'fitting in' with the group, particularly where the person identifies strongly as a member of that group, can be a catalyst for change. When creating messages, ensure that there are testimonials or statistics that highlight the prevalence of particular behaviours or practices among peers.

Provide holistic communications that support the process of change.

Understanding that behaviour change can only occur if a psychological change has been undertaken can help dramatically with the design of communications messages. Importantly, ensure that communications include references to sources of help and assistance to implement WHS practices or behaviours, particularly sources of financial aid, to alleviate any perceived barriers or costs.

Intimate knowledge and credibility are key

Ensure relevant imagery, messaging, and expertise are included in communications. The target audience must be understood before crafting messages. Ensure that imagery is appropriate – even the type of animal or equipment shown or referred to in messaging can erode credibility if it does not match the sector or geographical area being targeted.

Highlight the negative consequences of not acting/changing

Ensure that the likelihood and severity of potential hazards, if messaging about high risk activities, are strongly articulated.

Messages could also draw on non-safety consequences to reinforce preventative or protective behaviour (e.g., avoidance of high-risk activities or implementation of controls for critical risks), for example, referring to financial and/or family impact from poor WHS practices.

Emphasise the positive benefits of acting/changing

Highlight the positives before the negatives to reinforce changes that are made.

Balance your communication of negative consequences with a positive story. Emphasise the benefits of alternative behaviours and practices, to ensure that positive alternatives are articulated and there is an appeal to motivating emotional states.

Messages that talk about business benefits, such as efficiency and quality, can be particularly powerful as stakeholders realise that safety can be used to generate significant business value outside reduction in costs associated with injury and illness.

Integrating versus separating safety communications

Consider separating WHS communications when the message is about an incident, learning, or achievement that is specific to WHS. Otherwise, seek to integrate WHS within existing communications, such as using callout boxes, describing safety requirements or benefits, and linking people to relevant WHS information when describing work products or processes.

Who should use these guidelines

These guidelines are designed to be used by personnel involved in messaging about work, health and safety within the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry.

The primary audience is communications personnel from Research and Development Corporations (RDCs) and industry associations.

Secondary audiences include safety personnel, health and safety representatives, managers, and other stakeholders involved with industry associations or large employers.

Examples

- You are a Communications Officer for an RDC and have been asked to compile a newsletter article on latest developments in WHS across the dairy farming sector.

- You are a Safety Manager for an industry association and wish to broadcast a message to member organisations about a recent WHS incident, with a view to encouraging learning and improvement.

- You are a Senior Executive for an industry peak body and wish to acknowledge and recognise exceptional WHS performance from a stakeholder within your sector.

- You are a journalist or media producer and want to draw attention to a particular industry story and ensure you maintain consistent WHS messaging in line with industry associations and regulators.

Approach

To develop these guidelines, we reviewed the academic and grey literatures of relevance specifically to agriculture, forestry, and fishing. We also consulted general review articles surrounding communications, behavioural- and attitudinal-change, persuasion, and health belief theories to ensure our recommendations and suggestions are grounded in firm science.

Semi-structured interviews with subject matter experts were also conducted. These experts represented a range of professions and organisations with a vested interest in the agriculture, forestry, and fishing industry, ranging from government regulators and advisory services, to private industry, to academics, to industry associations. These diverse range of perspectives were synthesised and used to illustrate examples of how the theories and models apply in practice.

Name	Affiliation
Julia Teys	Teys Australia
Terri Wolfe	Teys Australia
Fiona O'Sullivan	Workplace Health and Safety QLD
Richard Love	Hancock Livestock
Kate Seehuusen	Barung Landcare
Jacqui Cannon	Consolidated Pastoral Company
Andrew Clarke	Department of Agriculture and Fisheries QLD
Richard Franklin	James Cook University
Alan Jackson	Local Government Risk Services
Raymond Chia	Australian Eggs Limited
Jennifer Medway	AgriFutures Australia
Lauren Sharkey	AgriFutures Australia
Kirsty McKee	AgriFutures Australia
Rachael Bryant	Australian Pork Limited
Christopher Izzo	Fisheries Research and Development Corporation
Sharon McGovern	Meat and Livestock Australia
Sally Roberts	Dairy Australia
Jane Littlejohn	Australian Wool Innovation
Elissa Lewis	Australian Wool Innovation
Stephen Feighan	Australian Wool Innovation
Rachael Holloway	Cotton Research and Development Corporation
Ian Taylor	Cotton Research and Development Corporation
Lucy Brennan	Cotton Australia
Mark Pym	Industry expert

Raise awareness

Why are you communicating?	Raise awareness of the scope and prevalence of a WHS issue; persuade people to start considering WHS as an important topic; highlight or draw attention to a specific risk.
What to say	**Primary strategies** • Emphasise the threat posed by hazards and share stories of incidents. • Describe potential losses to livelihood, family, workforce if the hazard is triggered and causes harm. • Describe any potential gains from changing a practice/approach to become more proactive (e.g., a policy to wear helmets on the farm can result in a safer workplace, less safety incidents, better retention of staff, and clearer expectations). • Ensure that the likelihood and severity of potential hazards are strongly articulated. • Help to understand how problematic or risky behaviour can impact important others (e.g., family). • Highlight that peers and influential others value the new behaviour. **Secondary strategies** • Increase awareness of the need to change through education, information, and personalised feedback. • Refer to legislated requirements and potential penalties for non-compliance. • Highlight non-safety consequences to reinforce preventative or protective behaviour, for example, referring to financial and/or family impact from poor WHS practices.
How to say it	• Use statistics and formal information (e.g., WHS requirements) from credible sources (see 'who should say it' below). • Craft stories that elicit both negative emotions (fear, anxiety about problematic behaviour) and positive emotions (hope, optimism that change is possible).
Who should say it	Organisations or individuals with high authority, such as an industry association, or well-known and respected research organisation (e.g., Research Development Corporation – RDC, agricultural college). A farmer/producer voice should also be featured as part of messaging to increase credibility and influence.
When to say it	• Develop a campaign to build awareness about specific hazards or issues, and target each with pointed messages that are audience and time relevant (e.g., preventing fire risk before grain harvest). • Raising awareness should be done when the majority of industry is not aware of an issue or has unaddressed concerns or reservations about changing.
Key WHS messages	• Safety is an ethical responsibility (it is done for deeper moral reasons) not a bureaucratic accountability (a paperwork or box-ticking exercise to demonstrate safety to others). • Safety is not just the absence of negatives (e.g., injuries and incidents) but also the presence of positives (e.g., capacities like leadership, expertise, effective safety systems, risk control measures, and safety culture). • Zero harm is an aspiration, not an expectation (focussing too intently on zero harm can drive reporting underground, resulting in the 'fudging' of safety metrics and the setup of punitive environments). • Emphasise the long-term business sustainability benefits of investing in WHS.
Communications tools	Print or online reports and research summaries; one-page fact sheets; short 'expert' videos; social media 'did you know' posts

What the research says about raising awareness

DeJoy (2003) combined several health and safety models that are based on the idea that people estimate the seriousness of risks, evaluate the costs and benefits and choose the best course of outcome that they think will maximise their benefits.
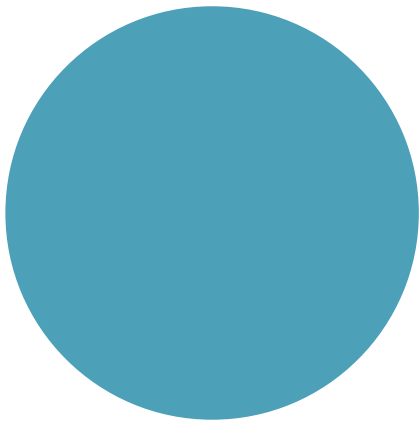
The integrated model has four key stages or steps; appraisal (can the hazard hurt me?), decision making (do the pros of protective behaviour outweigh the cons?), initiation (undertaking the behaviour) and adherence (keeping the behaviour going and incorporating it into a repertoire).

Five key aspects or predictors are relevant at each stage:

1. **Threat-related beliefs:** The interaction or combination of perceived susceptibility/ likelihood of harm and severity.

2. **Response efficacy:** The perceived effectiveness of response options (will the protective behaviours work?).

3. **Self-efficacy:** Confidence to carry out the behaviours or practices (can I do it?).

4. **Facilitating conditions:** Availability of safety equipment, assistance to implement systems, help and other support.

5. **Safety climate:** The perception of the value and importance placed on safety as inferred from safety practices, policies and leadership behaviours in the organisation.

Further reading and references

DeJoy, D. M. (1996). Theoretical models of health behavior and workplace self-protective behavior. *Journal of Safety Research*, 27(2), 61-72.

Franklin, R. C., McBain-Rigg, K. E., King, J. C., & Lower, T. (2015). Exploring the barriers and facilitators to adoption of improved work practices for safety in the primary industries. In *Australian Government: Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation*.

Rowan, K. E. (1991). Goals, obstacles, and strategies in risk communication: A problem-solving approach to improving communication about risks. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 19*(4), 300-329.

Learn from incidents

Why are you communicating?	Prevent incidents from reoccurring through sharing experiences of others; educate about the likelihood and severity of a WHS hazard; increase vigilance and unease towards a hazard.
What to say	• Unpack incidents and problems in detail, describing what the actual or potential consequences were, but always highlight what can be done to mitigate the issues in the future. • Encourage people to think 'what if' and apply lessons from other sectors or industries to their context. • Promote and recognise instances where industry has spoken up and highlighted a concern or issue. • Provide the capability for two-way communication (e.g., responding via email or letter, online discussion forum) to promote learning and sharing between readers/viewers of your material. • Avoid focussing on 'human error' as an explanation for what went wrong; dig deeper to understand why the decision or action made sense at the time and consider how organisational or team factors may have contributed to the outcome. • Describe losses in terms that farmers, fishers etc will appreciate (e.g., number of livestock lost, reduction in harvest output). • Emphasise the use of more effective risk controls, like elimination, substitution, and isolation over procedural and personal protective equipment. • Include prompting reflection questions to stimulate application to the workplace (e.g., How safe is your farm? How effective are your controls? Do you have any residual risks?).
How to say it	Share factual stories of lessons learned, emphasising what went wrong and why, and what could be done differently to manage the risk more effectively. Always make the story 'human', describing who was involved, their thoughts, words and actions, emotions through the story, and verbatim quotes of lessons learned.
Who should say it	A person that was personally involved in either the incident or the investigation (if appropriate to do so). Where possible, communicate jointly with the formal investigation authority, such as a regulator, to increase the weight and reach of the message.
When to say it	• Prior to high-intensity periods where the same incident is likely to occur (e.g., before harvest time) to draw attention and awareness to an issue. • When there are signs that industry is 'slipping backwards' in WHS progress or old behaviours are resurfacing. • After formal investigations have concluded and all the facts are known and verified.
Key WHS messages	• Human error is just the start of an incident investigation – there is always a deeper 'second story' that involves the work system and environment (people's WHS behaviour is shaped by their context). • Learn from what makes work successful just as often as learning from what makes it fail; often the two will share similarities.
Communications tools	Online investigation summaries; emailed incident alerts; detailed investigation 'documentary' videos (e.g., unpacking the causes of an incident).

What the research says

One of the most influential learning theories is Kolb's action learning cycle. The first step in this cycle is an experience. Experiences can be face-to-face such as at a community event, or virtual, such as a written case study or filmed interview.

The idea with the 'experience' stage is to give a rich story or account of a learning situation. The second step is 'reflective observation'. To embed learning, people will have a chance to watch or read about the preferred or best practice. This can be a written story combined with a video or other form of visual media.

Thirdly, people must think abstractly about the learning experience to create general rules or principles that can be applied elsewhere. This stage can be achieved by asking reflective questions such as 'how does this situation apply to your workplace' or 'what does this information mean for your own safety practice'.

Finally, to consolidate learning, consider asking questions that encourage people to apply what they learned, such as 'what commitments can you make to change your safety practice' or 'what's one thing you will do differently'.

Further reading and references

Drupsteen, L., & Hasle, P. (2014). Why do organizations not learn from incidents? Bottlenecks, causes and conditions for a failure to effectively learn. *Accident Analysis & Prevention, 72*, 351-358.

Edmondson, A. C. (2011). Strategies for learning from failure. *Harvard Business Review, 89*(4), 48-55.

Vogus, T. J., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Weick, K. E. (2010). Doing no harm: enabling, enacting, and elaborating a culture of safety in health care. *Academy of Management Perspectives, 24*(4), 60-77.

Reinforce best practice

Why are you communicating?	Embed an effective and positive WHS practice across industry; highlight and acknowledge WHS achievements; encourage others to follow suit and implement the same practice.
What to say	• Clarify the expected or best practice behaviours and identify why they are beneficial. • Provide public recognition or acknowledgement for the achievement, using real names and stories. • Refer back to the individuals/organisation over time to learn how they sustained the positive change, and how they are managing any threats or challenges to maintaining the practice. • Link the practice or success to broader goals or strategies that the industry is trying to achieve – create a sense that individuals and organisations can contribute to broader industry change.
How to say it	• Reinforce stories of success by describing what was done, the situation or context and the results that were achieved. • Embed these stories in "business as usual" communications, broadening the messaging beyond safety and reinforcing best business practice • Provide tangible messages about what best practice means to the individual, the business, the workplace, the family, and community. • Ensure details of the actions being recognised are meaningful and detailed, otherwise the message may be dismissed as non-genuine.
Who should say it	Acknowledgement should come from organisations or individuals with high status across the community; CEOs, general managers, regulators, industry organisations and federations.
When to say it	• As soon as practicable after the achievement has been reported or becomes known. • Reminders should be used periodically (e.g., monthly) to ensure the achievement is used to maximum effect. • When an individual or organisation who was previously non-compliant or falling short of WHS duties and responsibilities shows signs of positive change.
Key WHS messages	• Human adaptability and flexibility are often key to maintaining control over complex and dangerous work. • Development of deep expertise and mastery of practices as part of normal work, which create health and safety, are key to successful work.
Communications tools	Formal announcements on web and high visibility print media; award ceremonies and presentations at community events.

What the research says about reinforcing best practice

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is an important theory in the psychology discipline. Its basic idea is that people learn and change their behaviour from observing others. SCT suggests that performance is a product of interactions between the individual's cognitions (e.g., personality), their environment (e.g., important others), and their behaviours.

A personal characteristic may be their confidence to perform the behaviour. The response to certain behaviours also influences whether it will be performed again (e.g., if a shortcut produces efficiency gains). Also, the environment will contribute to performance by providing the conditions that shape or support behaviour (e.g., offering help to change).

Other aspects of SCT help to explain how it can be used for communications design and implementation.

Under SCT, the following aspects are important to consider:

- Role models can be influential sources of behaviour change, and to be effective, people should give their attention to the role model, receive feedback from a qualified and respected expert, and demonstrate the target behaviour in front of the expert.

- A strong connection between the behaviour and positive outcomes drives repeated performance; so, it is important to describe the benefits or positive consequences of a particular action.

- Self-efficacy or confidence is critical to behaviour change – scaffolding people with increasingly complex information and behaviours, promoting role models and practical examples, creating positive emotional states through humour and timing of messages, and giving encouragement or recognition for attempted behaviours regardless of success (provide feedback on improvement over time relative to the individual, not to others in the peer group).

- Self-identification is important, which means the more similar the role model is to the target audience, the more likely it is that he/she will be listened to.

Further reading and references

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Bandura, A. (1998). Health promotion from the perspective of social cognitive theory. *Psychology and health, 13*(4), 623-649.

Cheung, C. K., & Chan, C. M. (2000). Learning to work safely with reference to a social-cognitive model. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal, 28*(3), 293-308.

Cole, H. P. (2002). Cognitive–behavioral approaches to farm community safety education: A conceptual analysis. *Journal of Agricultural Safety and Health, 8*(2), 145.
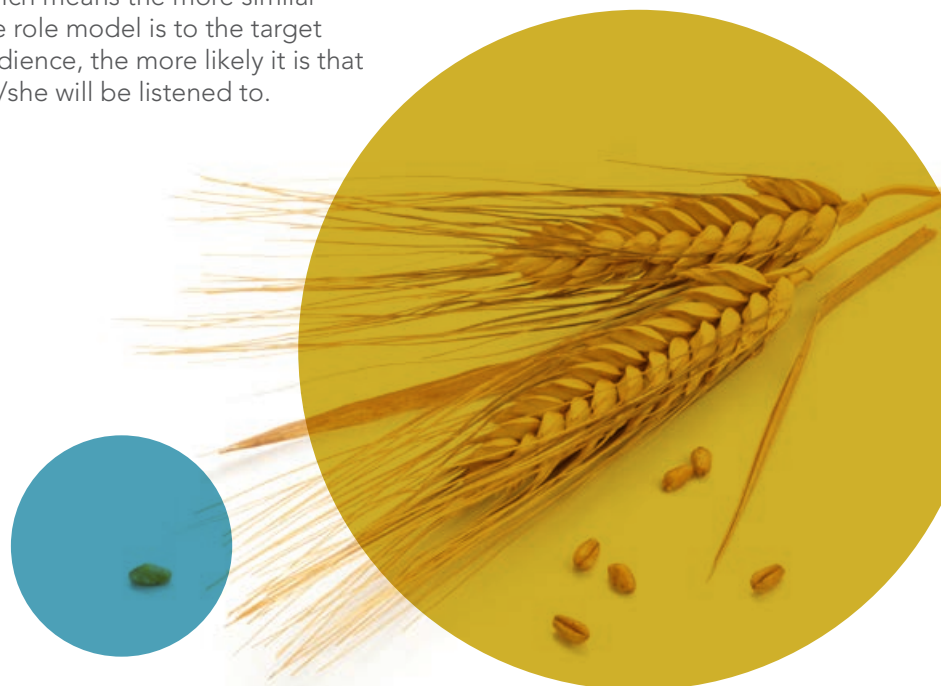
Promote change

Why are you communicating?	Stimulate a change in attitude or behaviour; provide inspiration and assistance to encourage a new way of behaving; boost confidence and reduce the intensity of barriers to change.
What to say	• Provide inspirational stories of success, highlighting the achievements and benefits conveyed by the change. • Paint a credible picture of what could be achieved if no case studies exist. • Emphasise the support and assistance that can be provided to help undertake the change and incorporate the expertise needed to do things differently. • Promote relationships and sharing between organisations so there is an understanding that improving WHS is a shared responsibility between organisations. • Emphasise the benefits of alternative behaviours and practices, to ensure that positive alternatives are articulated and there is an emotional appeal or message. • Messages that talk about business benefits, such as efficiency and quality, can be powerful as stakeholders may realise that safety can be used to generate significant business value outside of reduction in the costs associated with injury and illness. • Encourage people to make commitments to change/act differently. • Link up stakeholders with people who can help and support change.
How to say it	• Case studies and real-life examples should be used to bring credibility and inspiration. • Ensure that there are testimonials or statistics that highlight the prevalence of particular behaviours or practices among peers. Create a sense of 'everyone else is doing it this way'. • Ensure best-practice examples are rich and detailed and relevant to the target audience(s). • Explain how to change/make improvements in easy to access language (e.g., simple checklists). Be realistic about the investment required as costs can be a barrier to enable change.
Who should say it	Role models who are; respected as industry leaders, similar and relatable to the audience (e.g., also a grower in the agricultural sector), have a large social network, and exemplify the types of practices and attitudes you want to encourage.
When to say it	• Only after an adequate level of awareness has been generated on a particular issue or topic. • People should have moved past the 'contemplation' stage of change and be ready to undertake action. • People must see that the benefits of change outweigh the risks or drawbacks. • Resources must be ready and available for people who want to undertake change immediately.
Key WHS messages	• People are the solution to harness, not the problem to control. • Safety is a 'dynamic non-event'; constant change and adjustment are required to maintain a safe working environment in the face of threats and risks.
Communications tools	Case studies either printed or online; video interviews with key stakeholders; extended articles in industry magazines and other print media.

What the research says

Originally developed to help smoking cessation, the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TMC) has since been applied to a range of contexts, including health and safety. The TMC is essentially a process model, which means it describes the steps or stages of change that people progress through when deciding whether to engage in a target behaviour. There are six key stages to the model:

1. **Precontemplation:** No intention to engage in the behaviour.
2. **Contemplation:** Consideration of engaging in the behaviour.
3. **Preparation:** Gathering the skills and knowledge to engage in the behaviour.
4. **Action:** Performing the behaviour.
5. **Relapse:** Slipping back to 'old' ways of acting when experiencing pressure or difficulties.
6. **Maintenance:** Making the behaviour a natural routine and way of business.

Fundamentally, the TMC predicts that people will change their behaviour if the number and intensity of the 'pros' or benefits outweigh the 'cons' or negatives. This is called 'decisional balance' and when the scales tip towards a positive case for change, the target behaviour will be shown. Persuasion therefore, becomes an exercise in articulating the benefits of change.

The TMC is also very specific in terms of actions that correspond to each stage of the model. The table below summarises these strategies that can be used to inform communications messages.

Stage	Strategies
Precontemplation	• Increase awareness through education, information and personalised feedback; • Understand how problematic or risky behaviour can impact important others (e.g., family); • Experiencing negative emotions (fear, anxiety about problematic behaviour) and positive emotions (hope, optimism that change is possible); • Highlighting that peers and influential others value the new behaviour.
Contemplation	• Re-evaluating and changing personal identity to incorporate the new behaviour.
Preparation	• Making commitments to change/act differently; • Link up with people who can help and support change; • Replacing risky or unhelpful behaviours with safer behaviours.
Action/ Maintenance	• Use recognition and rewards to reinforce safe practices; • Use reminders and cues for safe practices.

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Lund, C. H., Carruth, A. K., Moody, K. B., & Logan, C. A. (2005). Theoretical approaches to motivating change: A farm family case example. *Journal of Health Education, 36*(5), 279-286.

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Prochaska, J. O., & Velicer, W. F. (1997). The transtheoretical model of health behavior change. *American journal of health promotion, 12*(1), 38-48.

Manage a crisis

Why are you communicating?	Respond in the most effective way during or following an incident; reduce unhelpful backlash or reputational damage; maximise learning and empathy.
What to say	• Involve key stakeholders (e.g., other RDCs, industry associations) as early as possible, and partner with them to ensure a consistent message. • Identify and strive towards mutually-beneficial outcomes for all involved parties. • Disclose information as soon as possible to fill the 'incident vacuum'. • Acknowledge when information is missing, unclear, or incomplete. • If in doubt, share more information rather than less, to avoid the perception that something is being hidden. • Encourage organisations where the incident occurred to offer a full apology (if appropriate). • Present new and positive information about the organisation or industry to offset the negative perceptions. • Remind stakeholders of 'past good' done by the organisation or industry. • Avoid speculation and agree to get back to a stakeholder with more accurate information by a specific deadline. • Reinforce and remind people of key messages throughout communications during a crisis.
How to say it	• Formal media statement that is verified and checked by all involved parties prior to release. • Short social media updates. • Open letters to industry, highlighting empathy for family and victims. • Empathise with your audience and appreciate their perspective before taking action (e.g., what do they want done about the hazard). • Be aware of personal privacy and state of mind during and following a traumatic incident.
Who should say it	Crisis management team leader, CEO of the affected company or association, key senior leaders of RDCs, and peak bodies.
When to say it	Follow a general process of information flow: • Acknowledge initial reports and updates, as new information comes to light. • Issue a longer summary of information via multiple channels; continue shorter more regular updates. • Provide a formal media statement, emphasising responses from senior management and/or prominent figures. • Hold a press conference or similar media engagement. • Consider providing joint statements (e.g., with WHS regulators). • Documented visits to incident site(s). • Release investigation reports with commentary and guidance. • Plan communications beyond the incident to ensure best practice is clear.
Key WHS messages	Retributive justice (e.g., sanctions, punishment, blame) creates more hurt and stifles reporting and learning; restorative justice (e.g., repairing what was damaged/broken, sharing stories) restores the status quo and encourages reporting and learning.
Communications tools	Official social media accounts; formal media statements and outlets; press conferences and interviews.

What the research says about crisis management

One influential model is Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). SCCT concentrates on the management of crises to protect reputation and maximise stakeholder satisfaction with the organisation's response. By understanding the crisis situation, SCCT provides a model for determining how to respond.

The first factor to consider is the initial level of perceived responsibility for the crisis event. Research has shown that generally, workplace health and safety incidents have high reputational risk because organisations are seen as responsible (i.e., knowingly placed someone at risk, violated a law/regulation, or took inappropriate action).

The second factor to consider is crisis history – if an organisation has experienced the same or similar incidents before, reputational risk will be much higher. Practically, organisations should avoid a strategy of 'playing the victim' when there has been a history of similar crises or negative events.

'Deny' strategies are the riskiest to use and should only be employed when the organisation can prove that they have no involvement in the incident (e.g., a case of mistaken identity or rumour mill activities).

'Diminish' strategies are also risky to use in practice, as they may backfire on reputation. However, they can be appropriate when an organisation is a victim of a chance or random event that wasn't anticipated. Making excuses, reducing the organisation's responsibility, and justifying the organisation's response or actions are all possible strategies that can be used here.

'Rebuild' crisis strategies are arguably the most effective for workplace health and safety incidents. These include:
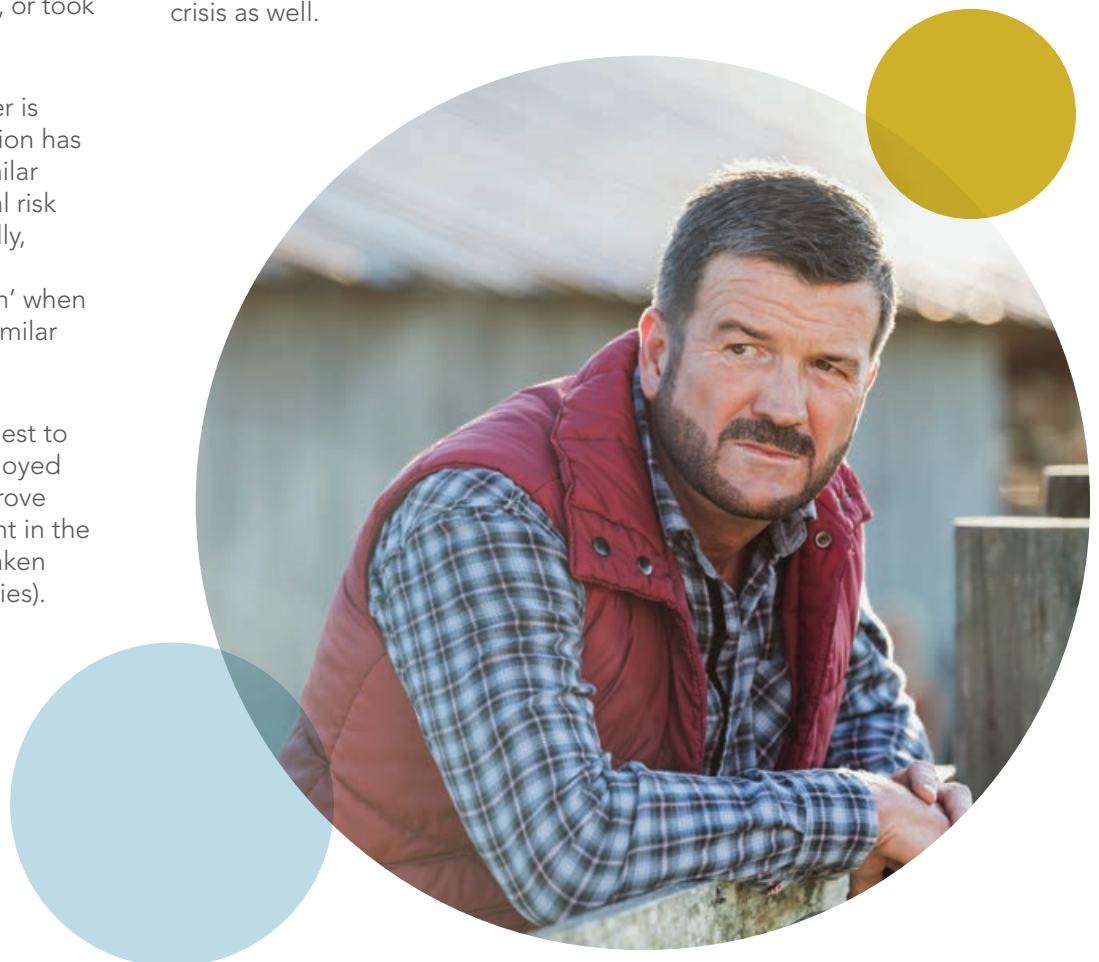
- Providing compensation.
- Apologising.
- Reminding stakeholders about past good deeds of the organisation.
- Reminding stakeholders that the organisation is a victim of the crisis as well.

Further reading and references

Coombs, W. T. (2007). Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory. *Corporate reputation review, 10*(3), 163-176.

Huang, Y. H. (2006). Crisis situations, communication strategies, and media coverage: A multicase study revisiting the communicative response model. *Communication Research, 33*(3), 180-205.

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Appendix

WHS Communications Checklist

Am I clear about the objectives and purpose of the communication activity? Do I know why I am communicating?	
Do I understand my target audience? Have I appropriately segmented the audience and know how to target each group? Have I consulted with representatives from the audience? Are some audiences prioritised over others and what is the sequencing of the audience messages?	
Do I know what I have to say? What general principles apply to my message?	
Do I know how to say my message in a way that will resonate and have maximum impact?	
Do I know what media I will use to disseminate my message? What media does my audience use most? Have I ensured a breadth of different media to maximise coverage?	
Do I know who will say my message? Is the source credible, respected, and appropriate for the message?	
Do I know the best timing for my message? Are there other messages currently being communicated that may interfere with mine? Is this the best time to be talking about my issue (e.g., if an investigation has only just begun, there are legal implications at stake, or stakeholders would be adversely affected by any preliminary information released)?	
Have I thought about and integrated key WHS messages?	
Have I considered whether any imagery or visual media are appropriate?	
Have I sought feedback from colleagues or key audience stakeholders before I send my message?	
What is the post-campaign communications plan to continue momentum and enable best practice?	

Using visual imagery

- Ensure cultural diversity of the specific industry is adequately represented.

- Check any in-field photos or images against relevant safety standards, consider consulting with an industry WHS expert to perform this checking.

- Use imagery that is appropriate for the context of the target audience, for example, showing pictures of a dairy farmer to the meat industry will not be received well.

- Avoid showing specific breeds or types of animals as this may cause some stakeholders to think the information is irrelevant.

- Try to show the full context of the situation if possible, for example, a worker performing a specific task with protective gear rather than just a close-up of the gear itself.

- Consider the primary audience and use role models/actors that are as similar as possible to that target group.

- Show multiple instances of people performing the same or similar safe practice, to create the impression that 'everyone is doing it'.

- Ensure activities, practices, and background signage are all compliant with relevant standards, requirements, and best practice behaviour.

Displaying statistics

According to Tufte (1983), who is widely considered as 'the Da Vinci of statistics', there are several key principles that underlie the visual representation of numerical data. Violating these principles undermines the integrity of your data and the intended message.

1. The representation of numbers on graphs should be directly proportional to the numerical quantities they represent: in other words, the graph's scale should be consistent (i.e., a change in the height of a bar on a chart should be consistent across all values of the chart).

2. Clear and detailed labelling should be used, and write a short accompanying explanation of the data being represented.

3. Keep the design of the graph consistent; focus on the data, not the aesthetics.

4. Do not use additional dimensions to represent data where fewer would be preferable, for example, avoid using a 3D chart when a flat 2D chart would suffice.

5. Do not quote data out of context.

6. When there is a lot of information to share, consider using multiple tables and graphs rather than one.

7. Encourage the eye to make comparisons between different aspects of the data – highlight variation and differences.

8. Use consistent units or metrics – avoid switching.

9. Avoid acronyms and jargon.

10. Use familiar frames of reference to illustrate size and/or scope, such as 'equivalent to X head of cattle per day'.

A poor example of a graph:

Serious Injuries

A good example of a graph:

Historical Data on Serious Injuries (Annual)
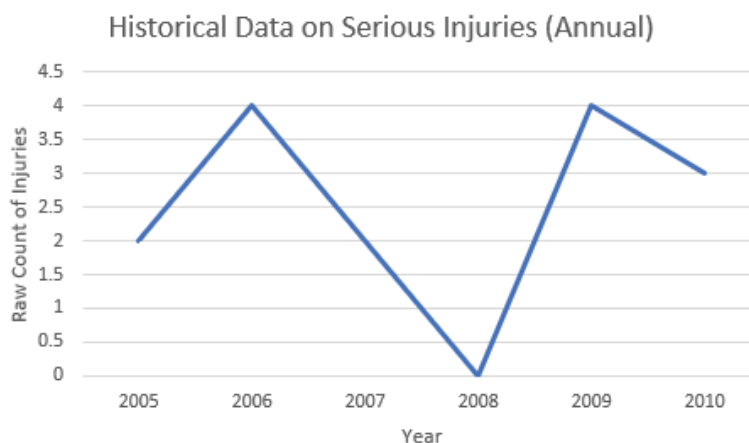
Segment your audience

Perceived similarity and identification with a particular group are key to persuading and communicating effectively with others about WHS. Central to this idea is Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT refers to how our sense of personal identity and belonging is formed through our memberships with various social groups. By being a member of a particular group, we essentially have drawn meaning about who we are, what we like/dislike, who we listen to and who we ignore. When we feel part of a group, we intrinsically want to 'fit in' so we change our behaviours to conform to the various unwritten rules and expectations that we think the group values.

One feature of SIT is the prediction that there are in-groups and out-groups. In other words, the in-group is the one we feel a part of and identify with and the out-group is 'everyone else'. The more identified we are with a group, the stronger this distinction and its effects over behaviour will be. We essentially favour or listen to people who are seen as part of 'us'.

The complexities of social group membership and identification should not be underestimated. At a basic level, communications should be crafted to create a sense of togetherness and belonging across multiple groups, if sharing and learning across different sectors is desirable. Highlighting differences or comparing groups against each other, even inadvertently, can accentuate between-group biases and cause messages from one sector to be ignored or dismissed in another.

At a deeper level, SIT suggests that audiences should be profiled or segmented, and messages crafted to have the greatest relevance to each group.

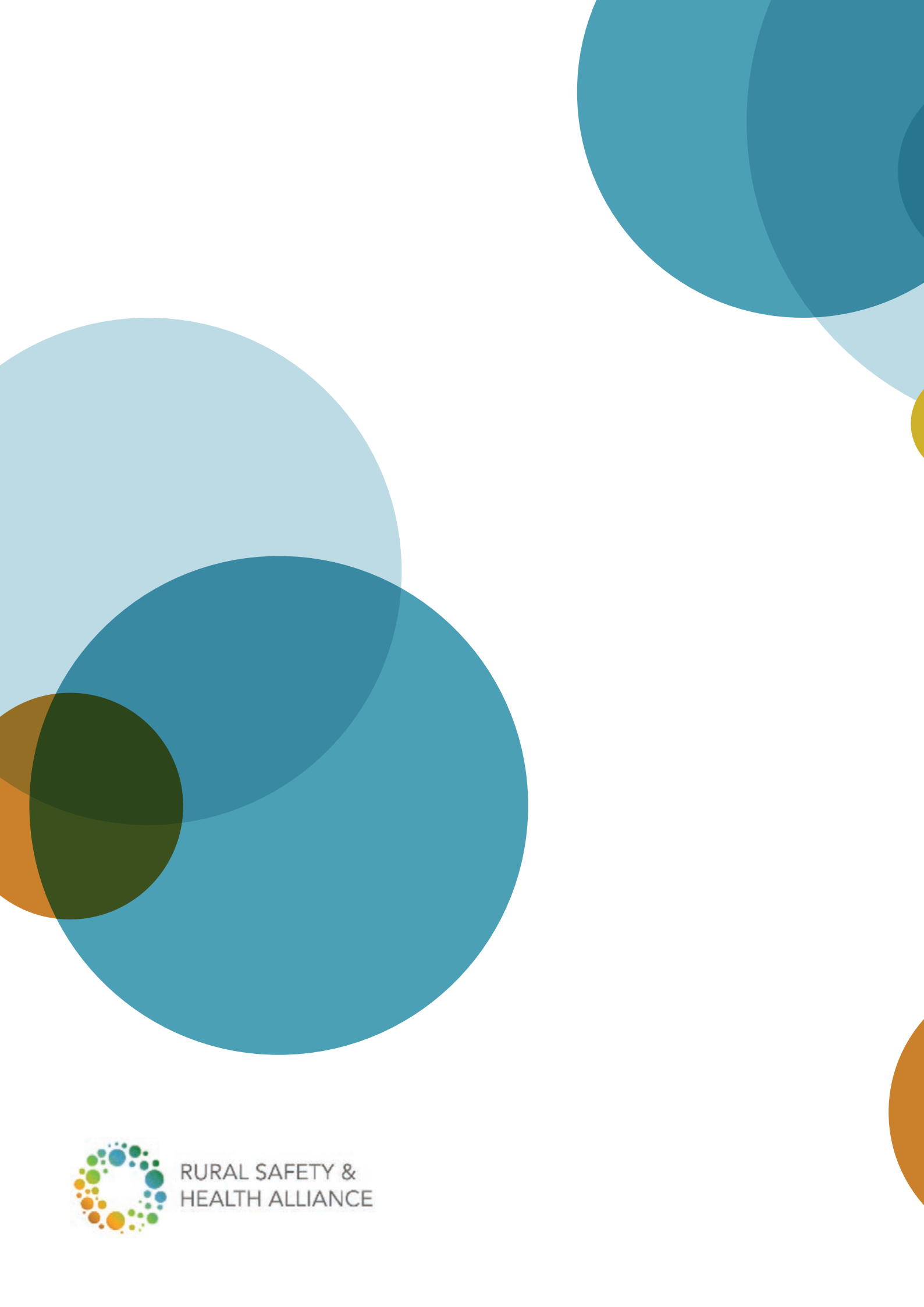For instance, within primary industries there is evidence of different profiles:

- Experienced (people who have been in the industry the longest and are most traditional in their values and practices around WHS),

- 'Innovators' (largely the younger generation who are tertiary educated and familiar with social media and other digital platforms), and

- 'The mainstream' (mixture of ages, avid supporters of the industry, and mostly prefer print media), within this group, people may not engage with their organisation for WHS-related industry information.

Your organisation or industry association may have developed audience profiles or market segments that you can use to guide your communications plan.

Each of these subgroups within the industry will have distinct social identities, hence the selection and promotion of role models and other tactics to achieve persuasion will need to be matched if they are to be successful.

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