



## • A DIAGNOSTIC FIELD TOOL • THE PRESENT-TENSE TRAP

# If it were tested, would your communication *hold up*?

*A self-assessment for leaders and teams who plan the organization's future — and want to know whether communication is built into that plan, or just reacting to this week.*

Many organizations are caught in the **Present-Tense Trap**: today's social media post, this month's newsletter, the funder email due in a week. But the things that decide whether and how you're heard — your reputation, your relationships, your standing on the issues that shape your work — form slowly, over months and years, with no one tending them.

## • THIS IS THE PRESENT-TENSE TRAP

The cost an organization pays when communication runs as a string of tactics instead of a function built into **strategy**. The issues that decide your future get no attention until they're urgent. The questions below test whether your communication would hold up. The value is in noticing which ones you can't answer.

## PART ONE The *Tells*.

*Signs your communication is stuck in the current term.*

- 1 ☐ **Your calendar rarely looks past this month.**  
Planning stops at the next event or campaign. There's no horizon beyond the one in front of you.
- 2 ☐ **Communication isn't in the room when strategy is set.**  
It's told what was decided, rather than helping decide. It executes the plan instead of shaping it.
- 3 ☐ **"More content" is the reflex answer to every goal.**  
Volume stands in for direction. Posting more feels like progress, whether or not it serves a goal.
- 4 ☐ **You count outputs, not standing.**  
Posts, releases, open rates — but not reputation, trust, or the strength of your relationships.
- 5 ☐ **No one is watching what's coming.**  
No one is named to track the social, political, or funding issues that could reshape your work in one to three years.



## PART TWO

The Questions, *by horizon.**Strategic communication works across three horizons — current, mid, and long. Test yours against each.*

## ► Identify

WHAT'S FORMING?

- ☐ Is anyone named to track the social, political, and funding issues that could reshape your work in 1–3 years?
- ☐ If the political tide shifts, do you know which past commitments — or retreats — become a story?
- ☐ Do you spot issues while they're emerging, or only once they're urgent?

## ► Analyze

WHAT'S THE IMPACT BEYOND TODAY?

- ☐ For each emerging issue, do you know how it could hit your reputation, relationships, or ability to operate?
- ☐ Are you naming the dangers, not just the opportunities?
- ☐ Have you mapped how a change in funder behavior could change what you can say or do?

## ► Link

IS IT TIED TO THE LONG GAME?

- ☐ Do reputation, credibility, and relationships get tended as long builds — not assumed fine until they break?
- ☐ Does your plan span all three horizons — current, mid, and long?
- ☐ Can you point to a communication goal tied to a mission goal, not just a tactic?

## ► Engage

ARE YOU IN THE CONVERSATION?

- ☐ Are you on record on the issues central to your mission, or silent until asked?
- ☐ Do you build with funders, partners, and policymakers **between** asks?
- ☐ When an issue breaks, do you have the standing to speak — or are you a stranger?

## PART THREE

The Quick *Filter.**Before you post, send, or react — ask.*

| ASK YOURSELF...                                           | IF YES...                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Will this still matter in a year?                         | → <i>Plan it — don't just publish it.</i>  |
| Does it build reputation, credibility, or a relationship? | → <i>Treat it as strategy, not output.</i> |
| Is it tied to a mission goal, not just activity?          | → <i>Route it into the plan.</i>           |
| Is it only urgent because no one planned for it?          | → <i>Name the gap. That's the finding.</i> |

If you couldn't answer some of these, the gap isn't effort — it's time horizon. Communication that only works when nothing's at stake isn't a strategy; it's a present-tense reflex. **Strategy Lab Collective diagnoses where the long-term issues live, and builds the communication that's ready before they arrive.**

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