

State targets bureaucratse to improve communication

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If any government entity can confuse the public, it's the tax collectors.

That's why Gale Garriott, director of Arizona's Department of Revenue, was so intrigued when he heard tax collectors from Washington state raving about a program there that was making government easier to understand.

At a conference in late 2005, Garriott heard about Washington's "plain talk" initiative. The revenue department there claims to have collected millions more after rewriting confusing letters to taxpayers.

"I'm thinking 'Really? You just change words on paper and good things will happen?' " he recalls. Garriott began talking to Washington officials to find out more.

The plain-language movement has been around for decades, said Don Byrne, executive director of the Center for Plain Language. The Maryland-based non-profit advocates the use of plain language in government, law, business and health care. In the federal government, it geared up when Vice President Al Gore led a plain-language initiative. A handful of states now have plain-language requirements.

The goals are simple: Make documents understandable on the first read. Make them useful and easy to scan for information through better design, headings and bullets. Use language geared for the intended audience. Avoid jargon.

Improving government communication, Byrne said, can save money and help people comply with laws. In Washington, state officials hired consultants to help them rewrite government correspondence and train thousands of state employees in the principles of plain talk. After Garriott approached them, officials there agreed to send two Washington state employees to Arizona to share plain talk concepts

with Garriott's staff.

Since then, a team within the Arizona Department of Revenue has identified about 400 form letters it would like to redo. So far, it has completed rewrites on about 100 of them, working to simplify, organize, shorten and make sure that they say what they are supposed to say in a way that doesn't require an accountant's interpretation.

But the initiative hasn't stopped at letters. The concepts are being applied to internal communications as well. You know those confusing e-mails from IT? They've been turned into plain talk, too.

"Our intent is to make plain-talking part of the culture of the Department of Revenue," Garriott said.

There's still a long way to go: many more letters, tax forms, tax pamphlets, the agency's Web site. But Garriott and his staff say the changes have already paid off.

The unclaimed property section, for example, received about 11,000 fewer phone calls in 2007 than the previous year after rewriting its letters. People understood what the agency was telling them and what they needed to do. They didn't have to call for an explanation, said Lucinda Kellison, unclaimed property claims and location manager. That has led to more time to do other work and the division was able to process about 30,000 more claims, she said.

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Kellison said they were considering adding more staffers just to help answer the phones, but now they don't have to. Employees feel better about their jobs, because they aren't answering the same questions over and over. Surveys show customer satisfaction has gone up, she said.

"We find we are getting a better response because they understand what they need to do," Kellison said. "It has had a very positive impact on the relationship my team has with their clients."

Last year, Garriott shared the positive results his agency was seeing with the governor's efficiency review committee. The governor decided to expand the plain talk initiative statewide. Now, employees in the revenue department are sharing their experiences with other states, working with officials in Nebraska, Oregon, California, Texas and New Mexico

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