Step 1: Propose a solution to a business problem

If you have a plan – or a mandate – to revise terrible, bureaucratic letters, forms, or web pages for your organization, not everyone will be happy about it. It may sound like a brilliant idea to you and to your top management. But to the day-to-day managers, it may sound like a lot of work, and many hours of staff time not devoted to routine tasks. They will want to know upfront what the pay-off will be.

This in itself is a very good way to focus your plain language project. You already know that creating clear applications for benefits, appeal rights and voting instructions, for example, is the right thing to do. But customer misunderstandings and complaints caused by poor documents also slow down businesses processes, and increase your organization's costs.

Ask the program itself to select a project that might solve a problem, save time, or reduce expenses. For example, if half of the cosmetologists applying for a state license fail to pay the correct fee because the instructions are ambiguous, then the managers might consider the benefit of making the instructions crystal-clear. They may have fewer forms to send back with letters, fewer phone calls, and fewer frustrated cosmetologists.

Make plain language a solution to a very specific business problem managers and staff are motivated to correct, rather than a noble cause you are presenting to them as an outsider. The goal is to get customers to read, and to understand what they read, so they can avoid hassles and understand their rights and requirements. But the goal is to also make your organization run more smoothly and inexpensively.

Strangely, even though overly technical or bureaucratic explanations regularly cause huge backlogs and costs for organizations, confusing documents aren't often pinpointed as the problem. State executives may wonder why they can't cut the time it takes to process a claim. But when the hands-on managers and customer services reps are asked, they often quickly point to bad forms or instructions. They know they cause customers to send in the wrong paperwork or misunderstand deadlines because they're the ones on the phone correcting the errors.

Once managers understand you are a potential problem-solver – a problem they, not you, have pinpointed -- they'll be much more willing to devote time to your project.

Resources
- [Read Joseph Kimble's classic piece on how many businesses and government agencies improved their performance and solved business problems by using plain language.](#)