



# raiders of the lost spark

A guide to firing up  
pre-inspection  
communications



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# picture the scene



**Somewhere from the swirling mists of the post room has come a letter. Its contents? Notification of inspection. Your timeline? Less than three months away.**

Well, it's too early for a large drink and too late to get that secondment to Tibet to search for the Yeti, so let's crack on. This guide aims to support your inspection preparations by:

- Looking at some of the pitfalls inspection might throw up
- Helping you get started on an inspection plan
- Identifying the communications do's and don'ts
- Pointing you at ways you can start to get staff and Board members up to speed
- Helping you learn from others' mistakes.

So grab your hat, whip and leather jacket and let's head off to find that lost spark.



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# rolling balls and fiery furnaces



**It's always good to be prepared. So before we start our journey, it's worth looking at some of the traps that explorers have fallen into before. That way, you can manage the menaces that may await, hopefully without dangling over a deep pit of voracious crocodiles!**

## **Hazard 1: clarity of purpose**

Sounds incredible to ask, but how far do the people in your business and your customers really know what you are trying to achieve? How many of them know your core aims, what you've done to meet them and where they individually fit into the picture? Throughout your intrepid inspection expedition, never underestimate the power of ignorance.

## **Hazard 2: friends, heroes and villains**

Every adventure needs a villain and sometimes people seem to be working for

you but in practice, things don't go according to plan. If there's a team member, customer or stakeholders lurking out there with a problem, chances are they don't have a sinister accent or a long leather overcoat; but they may well have an axe to grind at the very time your business is most exposed.

## **Hazard 3: false trails and hidden codes**

So much of an inspection is about having a clear trail of evidence. Simply asserting something will come back like the proverbial viper and bite you in a delicate place. There's a big gap between believing you do something and actually having the proof to back it up; so be on your guard for those brilliant initiatives that look great in theory, but don't actually deliver tangible results.

## **Hazard 4: treasure chest**

What does your business want to get out of the inspection? Is it to find the holy grail of three stars and excellent prospects? If it is

then great but you probably won't get there digging up your own back yard. Be realistic about what you where you are now and what's achievable between now and the big day. Keep saying you're excellent in the face of adversity and you face two major perils: accusations of not being authentic and schadenfraude if the inspection results don't back you up.

In the world of inspection communications these are just some of the hazards that await the unwary traveller. So, as forewarned is forearmed, let's get planning our route.



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# finding X on the map



**All good adventures feature some sort of map with the treasure hidden in a place marked by a big X. In this case, your X is getting the business to a place where, when the inspectors arrive, they find well-informed and motivated staff and stakeholders. So how do we get there?**

First of all, let's break the whole journey down into stages. By the time the inspectors arrive, you need to have lots of people - staff, Board members, councillors, customers and stakeholders - ready and able to deal with pretty much everything that gets thrown at them.

The first stage is to work out the messages you need to convey. What have you done well? Where have you made improvements? From this you can make sure you are consistent in what you say and keep pushing home the things that matter.

It's a little like breaking down a dam; a small trickle becomes a torrent and pretty soon, by keeping things consistent, people will forget they never knew your vision and values.

The next stage is to identify what you need to say and how you're going to say it. Producing a lengthy, text-heavy Word document will be much like trying to cross the Himalayas on roller skates – a lot of effort for few visible results. Most people won't read it, many that do will forget what it says and the rest will probably get confused about what links to what. So whatever you need to say, keep things simple, clear and memorable.

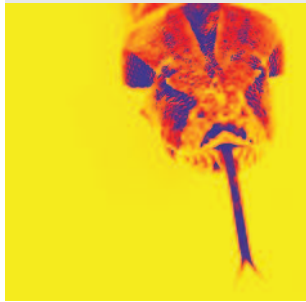
Next it's time to break things down into particular groups. Maybe you need to get certain messages to certain groups. Maybe your middle managers need some specific work on corporate policies. Or perhaps your repairs team needs to understand more about target outcomes for your planned improvement programme?

Whoever they are and whatever they need, just make sure you tell people what they need to know in ways that suit their needs.

Finally, as the suspenseful music builds, you come to the final stage. The bit where you are hiding behind the rocks watching and everyone knows you're going to get captured. Exciting isn't it? Well yes, because this final stage is where you really target your communications. Inspectors will spend time talking to individuals and focus groups. So make sure people know what will happen and support and encourage them. That way, when the climax comes and the inspectors are on-site, your people can go into their interview or focus group with chest out and head held high.



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# i hate snakes



**Most adventurers can expect to face some trials and tribulations on the road to inspection success. So what are the snakes and spiders you might come across and what might be the perfectly placed vine to let you swing across that bottomless ravine? Here's a few do's and don'ts for your journey.**

## **Snakes, scorpions and spiders**

- Don't overestimate what people know about you. Corporate plans, visions and values could be hieroglyphs as far as some people know.
- Don't exaggerate. Inspections are about finding evidence, and whilst you may perform many wondrous tasks, stay humble.

- Don't leave it till the last minute. You've got a few weeks to get your communications work together and delivered. The earlier you start, the more chance you've got of delivering things in a way people understand and remember.

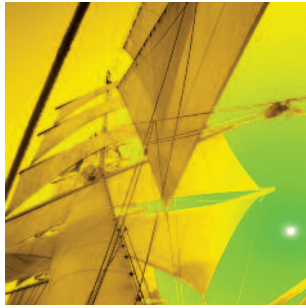
## **Vines, bridges and lorries with the keys left in**

- Keep your messages simple and clear. Like any communications, focus on what's important and staying consistent.
- Do get buy-in from the top. The last thing you want is your senior colleagues giving out different messages; so from chief executive to caretaker, make sure people have a shared vision and sense of where you're going.

- Do keep going. Inspection results can have a major impact on how you are perceived by your customers, staff, funders and partners. So whatever the cuts, bruises and strains you experience along the way remember at the end of your road there's a prize worth having.



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# ride 'em out



**And now, it's time to get going and keep movin', movin', movin' - even if people are disapprovin'! There's still a lot of ground to cover before you bag the jewels and sail off into the sunset. So what does that mean in practice?**

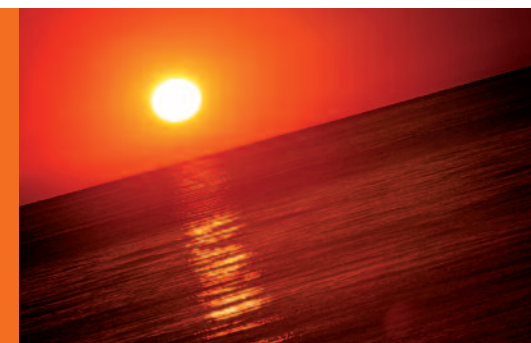
- Work out your messages, what you've actually achieved and how that links to outcomes for your customers. A good message matrix can be your very own 'sat nav' for keeping you on course.
- Set out your deliverables. Inevitably you'll be producing lots of 'stuff'. Whether it's posters, newsletters or summaries of assessments, be clear when you're going to do it and pace yourself.
- Tell a story. Not only do people like something that's coherent, if you're clever you can build upon previous work to get to that all important rip-roaring crescendo of motivational brilliance before the inspectors arrive.
- Use tools that match your audience. Think about how messages get round your organisation. How many maintenance specialists or caretakers get their information from the intranet? Do all your teams have meetings and briefings? The inspectors can get everywhere and talk to everyone. So make sure you don't exclude people; not only will it annoy them, but they won't be able to show their understanding of your organisation and where they fit in.
- Make inspection part of a longer story. Every good adventure needs a sequel; the build-up to inspection can be a great motivator and a shared sense of belonging. After all that work and energy, keep things going. Inspections fire up improvement plans, which then drive action plans and so the adventurous cycle keeps turning. So don't treat inspection as a one-off project - but a way of life that makes real change happen in your organisation.



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# look away from the light



**Well, our journey to find the lost spark is nearing its end.  
Now it's time to grab the girl, guy or both and ride off into  
the sunset.**

But before we do, it's worth reflecting that you are not the first traveller to cover this dusty trail. The Audit Commission has carried out hundreds of inspections in housing and that's as good a place as any to start. Take a selection from the trailblazers, journeymen and your peer group and see what happens; in fact, think of these reports as the wizened skulls pinned to tropical palms, helping you to see where people have seized the prize or come a proverbial cropper.

Good luck on your own special adventure, we hope you enjoy it and look forward to hearing tales of your heroic achievements a few months down the line.



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# roll the credits

If you want to boost your communication, we can help.  
The Bridge Group offers the following communication services:

- Inspection preparations
- Pro-active PR
- Interview skills training
- Presentation skills training
- Crisis PR
- Marketing campaigns.

For more information on these services,  
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