Building capacity for effective communication

Project led by the Centre for the Study of Science, Technology, and Policy (CSTEP) – India

Abstract

Recognizing the importance of effectively communicating policy research to decision-makers, CSTEP held training sessions in collaboration with The Writer’s Block – a leading firm in communications training – to build the organization’s capacity in writing policy briefs and technical reports, as well as in making visual and auditory presentations. The sessions were held over ten days with thirty-four participants from the organization, and included assessments of English proficiency, presentation skills for targeted audiences, and non-technical written communication.

On the Matching Funds

In 2011 the Think Tank Initiative established the Matching Funds program as another source of financial support. These funds support efforts by TTI-funded think tanks to achieve their long-term objectives, and also promote peer learning and collaboration.
WHAT THEY DID AND WHY

Organizations like CSTEP are in the business of disseminating their policy research results through a range of outputs that include reports, journal and conference papers, newspaper and magazine articles and policy briefs. As such, it is critical to CSTEP’s success that it be able to convey its messages in a crisp and clear manner. With TTI support, CSTEP is making efforts to strengthen the communication skills of its researchers, and their capacity to produce consistently high quality outputs.

Towards this end, CSTEP established a “Building Communications Skills” programme for its research members, aimed specifically at improving their writing and presentation skills.

The programme, financed by TTI Matching Funds, included communications training, developing organization-wide standards and style-guides, and establishing a quality assurance support system. The programme was developed and delivered by The Writers Block (TWB), a leading firm in technical communications and training.

Through this programme, CSTEP expects to:

- Improve its publishing record by authoring more books and edited volumes, chapters in edited books, peer-reviewed journal articles and articles in popular media such as newspapers and magazines;
- Better populate its resource centre with its own research materials;
- Increase the number and quality of presentations made within research communities, national and international seminars, conferences and workshops; and
- Enhance the quality of its policy briefs aimed at policymakers.

In a first instance, CSTEP received a communications training course, delivered in two batches in January and February, 2013. In total, 34 CSTEP members completed the 10-day course. The course focused on the following:

- Effective writing (with a focus on grammar)
- Effective professional communication (to ensure communication flows smoothly within and across research teams, resulting in more efficient and effective work processes)
- Technical report writing
- Effective presentations

To ensure the training was well-tailored to CSTEPs needs and existing capacities, TWB conducted a pre-training assessment whereby the writing skills of the 34 participants were evaluated, and the programme was developed accordingly. TWB also provided workbooks, learning material, as well as a handbook by Helen Shukla entitled “Technical Communication.”

RESULTS

TWB developed standards and guidelines for CSTEP, which included the creation of templates for reports, policy briefs and general articles. The purpose was to ensure that the participants bring consistency to their documents and follow a structured approach to creating publications.
The new standards include guidelines on:

- Branding: Use of logo for various documents and events
- Writing Content: Use of grammar, tone, voice, numbers, titles, datelines, references, etc.
- Common Formatting Rules: Font, page layout, size, margins, page breaks and numbers, colour schemes, headings, figures and tables etc.
- Writing Reports: general articles, policy briefs and brochures

An in-house training was conducted to ensure that researchers at CSTEP understood the importance of using standards and guidelines while writing any output on behalf of the organization.

NEXT STEPS

TWB will be providing ongoing support to CSTEP for one year following the training. This support will help to ensure the quality of CSTEP publications in terms of language, logical flow, structure, formatting and validation against the style guidelines.

This programme will address the common gap in communication skills of CSTEP’s research staff, helping the think tank to engage in more effective outreach efforts.