

WILY MANAGER

*Just-in-Time
Management
Advice*

How to Build a Communication Plan



This is one of a series of booklets available at www.wilymanager.com

At some point or other, every organization has heard that it needs to improve its' communication. Communication with employees is one of those jobs that never seems to end for managers, and a job that few leaders dedicate any effort to improving their competency in. **Luckily, there are a few simple, easy things a manager can do** that will exponentially improve performance in this area.

This booklet is intended to assist managers when they have a *specific event or decision* to communicate. Ongoing communication between organizations and employees is better covered in the topic bundle '[Communicating for Results](#)'.

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Regardless of what level a manager is at in an organization, s/he should not hesitate to initiate a communications plan. If your organization has embarked upon some significant event, and has not communicated it well, you can still create a communication plan for your direct reports so that they will have a better idea of what is going on. Further, many managers think they need to be supported by a corporate

Continued on next page

What is Coaching, continued

communication department to communicate well. This is not the case – managers at all levels have the most influence over their direct reports, and therefore the most powerful communication channel.

The techniques of effective communication are not difficult, but require discipline to execute. A written communication plan will assist in establishing and maintaining the required discipline. In some cases, a communication plan can be written on one sheet of paper. In other circumstances, the plan may be significantly longer.

The techniques of effective communication are not difficult, but require discipline to execute.

What is a Communications Plan?

It is an articulation of what messages need to be delivered at what time to what stakeholders. A good communication can be as short as one page, or as long as several hundred pages depending on the nature and complexity of what is being communicated.

Communication to stakeholders should be a standard element of any business plan

When to create a communications plan

All managers at all levels should lend significant thought to how, what and when they communicate. The list below is intended to suggest when it is appropriate to build a communication plan:

- During periods of significant organizational change
- In advance of an event that is thought to impact a large number of people
- Immediately after an unforeseen crisis event
- As part of the planning cycle of any business
- Communication to stakeholders should be a standard element of any business plan
- At the outset of a project or initiative

A [Communication Plan Template](#) is provided in Appendix A. You will find an [Example of a Communication Plan for an Organizational Change](#) in Appendix B.

Benefits of a Written Communication Plan

- A communication plan assists with the discipline of getting things done. If you publically commit to doing something, the chances are very good that there will be follow through.
- A communication plan reinforces the notion that communication is a process. It is much more than just telling people something once, and then thinking it is done.
- It forces leaders to target messages appropriate to their audiences.
- It prompts leaders to use a variety of media to convey and reinforce important messages.
- It is a proactive way to ensure that messages are delivered and controlled in a manner that minimizes the possibility of people finding out important information at an inappropriate time, or from an inappropriate source.
- A communication plan facilitates change.

9 Critical Elements of a Communication Plan

1. Guiding Principles
2. Context
3. Purpose or Objectives
4. Risk Analysis
5. Stakeholders Analysis
6. Targeting
7. Media
8. Budget
9. Assessment

Guiding Principles of your Communication Plan

It is important to determine what principles will guide you through the communication of an event or decision. Often, some information must be withheld for legal or ethical reasons, and that must be addressed. Here are some generic principles that will apply to most communications plans. You should alter this list and add to it as your situation applies:

- When something is not known, we won't 'make it up', or deflect the question.

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Guiding Principles of Your Communications Plan, continued

Very simply, we will state, “I don’t know”.

- Be transparent and respectful in order to build and maintain trust
- The message must be consistent, but also tailored to the targeted audience.
- Feedback will be listened to and carefully considered. If feedback is an important part of your communication, you should ensure there are mechanisms in place to collect, track and respond to feedback.
- Send the same message multiples times through a variety of media. It has been suggested that to fully communicate a message, leaders should repeat it seven times, and seven different ways.
- Connect people to the big picture – communicate why the message is important, and how it relates to high level business goals, mission or vision.
- Explain the rationale for any change, action or decision, not just the event itself. People need to understand both ‘what’ and ‘why’ a change is occurring.

Context

Once you have determined the principles that will guide your creation of the communications plan, it is critical to consider and make the context understood. Some points to consider:

- What has occurred to require this change, action or decision now?
- What is the rationale for this change at this time?
- Describe the current business reality:
 - Competitive pressures
 - Financial situation
- What is the impact of NOT changing or acting?
- How does the change relate to the business strategy?
- What are the applicable definitions and terms of reference? For example, if you refer to ‘the senior leadership team’, is there a common understanding of who that encompasses?
- Describe in vivid terms how the situation will be different after the change.

Related Wily Manager Topic Bundles

Change Management

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Communicating For Results

Improve Your Public Speaking and Presentation Skills

Visit
www.wilymanager.com
 to get free cheat sheets
 about these topics
 (and many others)

Purpose/Objectives of the Communication

For an event requiring a communications plan, there is a desired outcome that you are trying to drive your target audience to. In some cases, you want people to do or act differently than they have been. In other cases, you simply want them to know certain things. Either way, your communication plan should have a clear articulation of what the end in mind is:

- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What do you want people to do or think differently as a result of the communication?
- What is the time period during which the described events will take place?
- Continually bring clarity to the situation.
- Enable acceptance of a change, action or decision by defining boundaries, and reinforcing what is negotiable and what is not.
- To enable 'ownership' of a change, action or decision.
- Messaging should have a clear link to and reinforce corporate strategy.

Risk Analysis

A risk analysis for the communication does not need to be an onerous task. In many cases, it can be easily accomplished by answering the following questions:

- What things may impact ability to communicate?
 - Are the target audiences available?
 - Is there budget to spread the message?
- What kind of resistance can be expected?
- What happens if you don't bother to communicate in a coordinated fashion?
- What happens if people are not communicated to at all?

Stakeholders

There are two common mistakes that people make when building communication plans:

- Not properly identifying all stakeholders
- Not differentiating the value or importance of one stakeholder group from another

Begin by listing all potential stakeholders:

- Your boss(es)
- Employee groups (there may be several, depending on the situation). Do not overlook support or administrative staff.
- Internal departments or business units
- Foreign subsidiaries
- External stakeholders such as suppliers and other service providers
- The public
- Government or regulatory bodies
- The media
- Others?

Second, eliminate stakeholders for whom there is no material impact of your action, decision or change. Next rank each remaining stakeholder group against the next to determine a weighting for each. Ensure that the effort and resources expended on each stakeholder group is relative to its importance.

Targeting

When marketing goods or services to potential customers, organizations segment audiences and tailor messaging and action specific to the group. Building a

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Targeting, continued

communication plan is no different. Below are some sample questions to consider, and in brackets are examples for a target group of employees from a company/department that is announcing layoffs

- What does each stakeholder group **want** to hear? *(The employee group wants to hear that their jobs are safe, but given that is not possible, they want to hear that they will be treated respectfully, and taken care of)*
- What does each stakeholder group **need** to hear? *(The employee group needs to hear what is going to happen and when. If there is no chance this bad situation will change, then it is important NOT to imply that there is any hope it will change)*
- How can the message be tailored to various stakeholder groups based on the above two questions? *(Talk about how people will be taken care of, NOT the cost savings to the company. When communicating to investors, cost savings are a valid concern)*
- What media will have the most impact in delivering the message? *(Bad news should always be delivered as personally as possible. In this case, it is best delivered face to face by the immediate supervisor of those affected)*
- Messaging – it may be framed differently for different audiences
- Use language and media that is appropriate to the target audience. There is no value, for example, in using electronic media when targeting a group that does not have internet access.
- When preparing a communication try to figure out the ‘What’s in it for me?’ (WIIFM) of the target audience.

If there is no chance this bad situation will change, then it is important NOT to imply that there is any hope it will change.

Communication Media

As discussed above, it is important to consider which media is most appropriate to which target audience to effectively communicate a message. Below are some common communication media:

- One on one meetings
- Townhall or community meetings
- Newsletter
- Newspaper, periodical or other print media
- Email
- Recurring email message of the day/week
- Television or radio
- Webcast or podcast
- Internet or intranet
- Social media

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Communication Media, continued

- Coaching – immediate supervisor to employee
- Training – knowledge about the change, and the required skills to make the change and succeed in the new organization
- Management by Walking Around (MBWA)
- Breakfast club meeting: Informal, all welcome meeting
- Team meetings with structured agendas that specify the communication of certain messages
- Feedback media: forums, suggestion boxes
- Lunch & learn events
- Forms of recognition to reinforce desired behaviors
- The ‘Grapevine’. The grapevine is by definition difficult to control, however it is an effective medium. If you wish to maintain more control of your message than the grapevine allows, you need to use a number of other media to pre-empt the grapevine.

Budget

Based on who you are trying to target and what media will be required to deliver the message effectively, a budget will be required. In some cases, the budgetary requirements will be minimal, and in other cases it will be considerable. The [Media Decision Worksheet](#) (Appendix C) encourages you to suggest a budget requirement for each media chosen to deliver a specific message.

Assessment

It is important to assess and, where possible, measure the impact that a communications plan has had. These Key Success Factors (KSF) and metrics need to be determined in advance of the execution of the plan

Here are some examples of KSFs for a communications plan:

Key Success Factors for Successful Change

1. A widespread understanding of why the change is occurring and what will happen during the change
2. Confidence in the leadership responsible for the change
3. Engagement of leaders at all levels. The most credible change agent is an employee’s immediate supervisor
4. Engagement of staff. Engaged leaders need to bring staff along if the change is to be successful
5. Well thought out communication with consistent messaging.

Measures for Communications Effectiveness

Leading:

- Progress against plan
- Number of times and/or different media that a message is communicated
- Amount of feedback received

Lagging:

- Employee perception surveys. Employee engagement surveys
- Employee retention rate for first year after the change
- Level of behavior change – we asked people to do something different. Are they doing it?
- Achievement of overall business goals.

So...you've carefully articulated all the elements of your communication plan. Unfortunately, people are not buying in to your message as quickly as you like.

What do you do?

Managing Resistance

So... you've carefully articulated all the elements of your communications plan, and begun to roll it out. Unfortunately, people are not buying-in to your message as quickly as you'd like. What do you do?

First of all, you shouldn't panic, or think that all the effort put into your communications plan was somehow wasted. Some people will resist your message or claim not to understand it. Here are some things you can do to help minimize resistance:

- Expect and anticipate resistance
- Do not overreact. Allow that some people will require extra attention to make a change
- Determine if any individual's behavior may threaten the change, and act swiftly to either turn them around or remove them from the situation
- Some people will resist change because they are significantly threatened by what is happening. Others may resist aspects of the change because they have a genuine interest in improving the situation or the organization. Resisters must be listened to, and have the potential to be champions of whatever event you are communicating.

Other Tips for an Effective Communications Plan

- Consider an effective communication campaign to look very similar to a marketing initiative. Make one person or group responsible for the look and feel of communications, and ensure it is consistently branded.
- Use electronic media such as email and website. These are usually inexpensive, and can be highly effective.
- Always target your audience properly, and remember that the same message may be communicated differently to different target groups.
- Important messages must be 'owned' by the most senior leadership in the situation.
- Only ask people for their opinions or feedback if you are prepared to consider the input. It is disrespectful to give people the impression that they have some influence if they do not.
- Prepare an 'elevator speech' for what you are communicating. Be prepared to condense your message into small, easy to understand segments.
- When soliciting feedback or two-way communication, ensure there is media available to support this. It is not enough to say, "We'd like to hear from you", there must be infrastructure in place to gather their opinions.
- Be very clear on exactly what action, or change in behaviors the communication is intended to address.
- Describe where people can go to get help around whatever issue is being communicated.

Related Topic Bundles

[Change Management](#)

[Giving and Receiving Feedback](#)

[Communicating for Results](#)

[Improve Your Public Speaking and Presentation Skills](#)

Wily Manager Pick

[Communication Planning: An Integrated Approach](#)

Sherry Devereaux Ferguson



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Appendix: Tools and Resources

- A. [Communication Plan Template](#)
- B. [Example of a Communication Plan for an Organizational Change](#)
- C. [Media Decision Worksheet](#)
- D. [Where to Get More Information](#)

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Appendix A

Communication Plan Template

Communications Plan Template	
Guiding Principles	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X • X • x 	
Context	
Definitions and terms of reference	
Briefly describe what events have occurred to get the organization to here.	
Purpose or Objectives	
Why are you communicating this	
What business outcomes does this connect to?	
What do you want people to know or do differently?	
Risk Analysis	
What happens if you don't communicate this	
What are potential downsides of communicating this	
What could make this communication fail?	
Stakeholder Analysis	
Stakeholder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X • X • X • X 	Relative Importance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X • X • X • X

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Appendix A, continued

Communication Process				
Description or Action	Target Audience	Media to be used	Timing or Frequency	Budget or Resources
Assessment				
Key Success Factors for this Communication:				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X • X • x 				
Leading Indicators		Lagging Indicators		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X • X • x 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • X • X • x 		

Appendix B

Example of a Communication Plan for an Organizational Change

Organizational Change Communication Plan	
Guiding Principles	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When something is not known, we won't "make it up". We'll say when we don't know • Be transparent and respectful in order to build and maintain trust • The message must be consistent, but also tailored to the targeted audience. • Feedback will be listened to and carefully considered. • Send the same message multiples times through a variety of media • We need to be absolute clear on what we need input from people on, and what is not negotiable 	
Context	
Definitions and terms of reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "Senior Team" is Dave and his direct reports • "Managers" are anyone with direct reports, including front line leaders • "Materially Affected" is anyone who will have a different reporting relationship or a different job as a result of the change.
Briefly describe what events have occurred to get the organization to here.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization has grown quickly by acquisition. Now the focus must change to growing existing assets. In order to do so, there must a much sharper focus on growing revenues from existing sources, and carefully containing costs. This organizational realignment will enable these changes
Purpose or Objectives	
Why are you communicating this	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organizational structure will change April 1. People need to understand where they fit in to the new structure
What business outcomes does this connect to?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased revenue prospects and a renewed focus on cost control both are outcomes of this org change. This communication will enable the change.
What do you want people to know or do differently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new organization connects people much more closely with Profit & Loss accountability. We need to ensure they have the tools to do this well.
Risk Analysis	
What happens if you don't communicate this	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are new reporting relationships and individual competency requirements. If we don't carefully communicate what we're doing and why, the level of resistance will be significantly higher
What are potential downsides of communicating this	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This communication will distract people from doing their core work for some period. However, it is not optional to communicate this change
What could make this communication fail?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If we do not successfully communicate the importance to the company, and to its people it will fail • If we do not explain "What's in it for me"

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Appendix B, continued

Stakeholder Analysis				
Stakeholder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior Leaders • Managers • Employees • Support Groups • Suppliers • Customers • Joint Venture Partners • Investors/Shareholders 		Relative Importance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High • High • Highest • Medium • Low – will be talking to same people • Low – they should notice no change • Medium – need to manage interface changes • Low – inform 		
Communication Process				
Description or Action	Target Audience	Media to be used	Timing or Frequency	Budget or Resources
Senior leaders to be spoken to one on one about new organization	Senior Leadership Team	One to one	Month prior to announcement	Allocate adequate time
Senior leaders group meeting to roll out the organizational change	All managers	Large Group meeting	One week prior to announcement	\$1000 for meeting space
Create a script for mgrs to be able to talk to their people about the change to ensure consistency	All managers	Briefing note	Day of announcement	None
Managers to meet with their current direct reports to champion the change	Materially affected	One to one	First week after announcement	Allocate adequate time
Managers to roll out change to people under each of their care in the new organization	Materially affected	Small group meeting	Second week after announcement	None
Leading Change seminar	All managers	Training	After announcement before change	\$5000 to train all managers
Intranet page dedicated to the future state to act as a repository for documents, as well as a place to post updates	All employees	Intranet	Immediately and updated weekly	\$15000 for contractor to manage
Forum and Blog about the change.	All employees	Social Media	CEO to start day of announcement	Allocate adequate time
Frequently asked questions	All employees	Intranet	Immediately and updated daily	Included in contractor
Short perception surveys as to progress of the organizational change	Materially affected	On-line survey tool	Random sample once per fortnight	\$5000
1 hour managers meeting once per fortnight to update change	All managers	Small group meeting	Once per fortnight	None

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Appendix B, continued

Assessment	
<p>Key Success Factors for this Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A widespread understanding of why the change is occurring and what will happen during the change • Confidence in the leadership responsible for the change • Engagement of leaders at all levels. The most credible change agent is an employee's immediate supervisor • Engagement of staff. Engaged leaders need to bring staff along if the change is to be successful • Well thought out communication with consistent messaging 	
<p>Leading Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress against plan • Number of times and/or different media that a message is communicated • Amount of feedback received 	<p>Lagging Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee perception surveys • Employee retention rate for first year after the change

Appendix C

Media Decision Worksheet

Media	Advantages	Disadvantages	Costs
One on one meetings	Personal and highly effective when conducted properly	Time consuming	Time
Community meetings	A compelling message can be delivered broadly at once	It needs to be well organized and presented, or there is a risk of reputation damage	Cost for space and equipment can be considerable
Newsletter	There is a record of the communication that people can come back to	It is not interactive, and it assumes people have common understandings of terms	Printing a newsletter can be costly. Where possible, publish electronically
Newspaper & periodicals	Wide distribution that is available to many stakeholders	Print is expensive, and it is only one small part of everything else contained in the publication	Considerable
Email	It is cheap and information moves quickly and easily	Information is often misconstrued due to the cryptic and non-interactive nature of the medium	Little or none
Weekly update (print or email)	It provides discipline to reinforce key messages regularly	Needs to be well articulated to avoid any potential misinterpretation	Generally low
Television or radio	You have to know your target audience will be listening when your message is broadcast	It is a one-way medium and does not encourage feedback. Also, it is easy to look or sound foolish if you have no broadcast training	Very expensive
Webcast or podcast	Is personal, and can be received in real time or at the audience's convenience	The technology to do this well is still a bit of a mystery to many people	Low to moderate

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Appendix C, continued

Internet or Intranet	There is a record for people to refer to at their convenience, it can be designed for two-way communication	Good web communication is different from other media, and is generally not well done in corporate settings	Low
Social Media	Particular effective in “viral” marketing campaigns	Bad news travels as well as good news by social media. Be prepared	Low
Coaching	Personal and highly effective when done properly	Time consuming	Time
Training	If the training is targeted properly it can highly effective	Unfocused training can be expensive and worthless	Moderate
Management by walking around	Personal and highly effective when done properly	Public conversations must always be more guarded than private ones	Time
Breakfast club (informal meetings)	A way to reach out to groups of stakeholders in an informal setting	Feedback may not be as genuine in a group setting	Moderate
Team or group Meetings	Can be an effective way to engage a number of stakeholders at once	Poorly run meetings can be damaging, and group dynamics may affect feedback	Time
Feedback Media (forums, suggestion box etc.)	Can be useful for gathering feedback anonymously	Doesn't allow people to clarify or articulate their feedback	Low
Lunch and learn	A way to reach out to groups of stakeholders in an informal setting	Feedback may not be as genuine in a group setting	Low
Recognition	The most powerful way to reinforce a message is to recognize people who act appropriately	When recognition is poorly executed it can be very damaging	Low to moderate
Grapevine	When properly engineered the grapevine can be very effective	There is very little control over the grapevine as a medium.	Low
Blogs	For the right audience can be personal and effective. Also there is record of the content	Maintaining a blog is labor intensive	Low

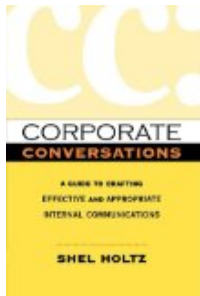
Appendix D

Where to Get More Information



Communication Planning: An Integrated Approach (Sherry Devereaux Ferguson)

“Communication Planning takes a comprehensive approach to examining the role of integrated planning in modern organizations. Author Sherry Ferguson divides the book into four parts: 1) establishing strategic planning cultures, 2) writing different types of communication plans, 3) theoretical foundations of communication planning, and 4) strategic approach to planning for issues management.”



Corporate Conversations: A Guide to Crafting Effective and Appropriate Internal Communications (Shel Holtz)

*“Corporate Conversations is a comprehensive guide to crafting and delivering vital internal messages. The book covers a broad range of issues, including: * the four types of corporate and business communications (human resources, business-related, legal, and informal) * how to communicate bad news * managing employee-to-employee communication * how to measure the impact of internal communications”*



Communicating change: Winning Employee Support for New Business Goals (T. Larkin and Sandar Larkin)

“Written for busy managers at all levels, Communicating Change offers specific prescriptions for effecting successful change centered around three guiding principles:

- *Conveying the message through supervisors*
- *Communicating face-to-face*
- *Making the changes relevant to each work area*

In addition, a variety of helpful forms, checklists, sample communications, and surveys help managers to quickly put these principles into action.”

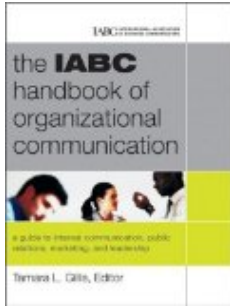


73 ways to Improve Your Employee Communication Program (Jane Shannon)

“In her clear and entertaining style, Jane Shannon has written the ultimate how-to guide for anyone who communicates with employees, featuring actions you can take today without asking permission from anyone, even your boss.”

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Appendix D, continued



[The IABC Handbook of Organizational Communication: A Guide to Internal Communication, Public Relations, Marketing and Leadership](#) (Tamara Gillis)

"The IABC Handbook of Organizational Communication is the fourth edition of the best-selling resource that offers a comprehensive collection of practical knowledge and insights about effective corporate communication and its effect on organizational success. "

Web Resources

'Creating the Communications Plan'

http://www.publicaffairs.ubc.ca/facultystaff/diy/commstrat/create_comm_plan.pdf - lots of detail and examples (25 page pdf)

'The Communication Plan'

<http://www.nsba.org/sbot/toolkit/tcp.html>

'How to Develop a Communications Plan'

<http://www.hieran.com/comet/howto.html>

'Creating a Communication Plan'

<http://www.communicationideas.com/communication-plan.html>

Developing a Strategic Communications Plan

<http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=90&CID=385&ItemID=5000036&NID=5010036&LanguageID=0>

Template for Strategic Communications Plan (22 page pdf – excellent)

http://www.wkkf.org/DesktopModules/WKF_Dmaltem/ViewDoc.aspx?LanguageID=0&CID=385&ListID=28&ItemID=5000009&Id=PDFFile

Three Sample Communication Plans

<http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=90&CID=385&ItemID=5000037&NID=5010037&LanguageID=0>

Writing a Communications Plan

http://marketing-plans.suite101.com/article.cfm/writing_a_communications_plan

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Appendix D, continued

Developing a Communications Strategy (4 page pdf)

http://www.idrc.ca/uploads/user-S/11606746331Sheet01_CommStrategy.pdf

How to write a strategic communication plan

http://www.ehow.com/how_2116678_write-strategic-communication-plan.html