

May 2020

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Communication skills for school administrators

Good school communications builds trust within a school community. If the school has a communications plan, implements it well, communicates consistently and responds to crises with professionalism, empathy and promptness, all school operations are more likely to run more smoothly.

Understanding how to communicate effectively is an essential skill, and many school administrators have little or no training. They must learn on the job through trial and error, hoping that they build these skills before the next crisis.

Do you have a plan?

The current health crisis is not a good time to develop a comprehensive communications plan. Schools are in crisis mode, and the focus is on sharing updates with families, communicating with staff, and planning next steps. Schools that lack channels of communication for sharing this information will need to quickly outline a plan for short-term emergency needs. When it is over, the focus can shift to setting up systems for the next crisis. Take notes about what worked and what caused concerns or confusion.

Principals are leaders, managers and executives

Research consistently shows that the success of leaders in any business depends on communication skills, and communication is often at the top of the list of the most important skills for managers and employees alike.

Successful communications represents a major part of the job for any executive or administrator. To motivate educators, manage staff, earn the trust of parents, the community, and the public, they must handle operational tasks with skills and convey competence — while following the rules of a public agency.

Communication is not a newsletter, social media profile or a monthly meeting. Those are tactics. Good public relations depends on building strong, positive relationships with your audiences through trustworthy, regular information.

Learning from peers and experts

School administrators have a full plate. There are many helpful resources to help build or update this important skillset. The National School Public Relations Association publishes a guide to public engagement for school leaders. “Principals in the Public” offers effective ways for school leaders to build community support, research opinions of staff and parents and develop a plan and tactics for reaching a diverse audience. www.nspr.org/content/principals-public-engaging-community-support

For subscription information, contact WSSDA at (800) 562-8927 or (360) 493-9231.

For content questions, contact: Marcia Latta Communications Consultant (503) 580-2612.

Reproduction rights for materials distributed as part of *On Call* are granted only to subscribing districts and are restricted to distribution as part of their local public relations programs.



(Over)

Principals can also seek support and guidance from their peers at other schools and from the district office. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; what works in one school is often effective in another.

Universal findings

According to NSPRA, the following are common effective communication findings among schools:

- Parents read school newsletters.
- Teachers are the most credible source of information about your schools.
- Parents are less concerned than schools think about national and state test scores.
- School quality is judged by staff and principal interactions with students and parents.

www.nspr.org/principals

PR Principles

Principals can be more effective at communicating by understanding some basic principles of public relations.

Build relationships, understand people

Direct connections with people are the most effective way to communicate effectively. The successful school administrator has to be part psychologist, part communicator and part business manager. Success depends on knowing the district's audiences, reaching them and speaking and listening to them directly.

Don't make assumptions

Administrators need to motivate people, but first they need to understand the perceptions and attitudes of the target audience. The only way to have accurate information about any person or group is to proactively listen, watch and ask the right questions. Pay attention to body language and look at actions as well as words. Taking time to do this is critical to your ultimate success.

Timing is everything

Your plan should include what you say and when you say it. Bad timing can be almost as bad as not telling people at all. People who feel uninformed or "left out of the loop" may take actions that are harmful to the organization. Think through what groups need to know about any particular topic, the order in which they need to learn the news and how you will manage the flow of information. In almost every case, you will want to start by sharing information on the "inside," with fellow administrators and your staff. If the news is something that affects students and parents, they should be next in the sequence of contacts. If it affects your volunteers, key communicators and others, you will want to include them. Think about the timing, quickly make a list, and make sure those who need to know something have the information at the appropriate time.

Everyone is a communicator

School staff are credible sources of information about schools. If the general public has a negative perception of your school, check in with staff and work on attitudes that may spill into the community. The opinions and perceptions of staff members spread like wildfire. If they have concerns, try to understand why and address issues that are causing negative perceptions.

Remember that the members of your staff consist of more than the teaching staff. The successful administrator knows employees who serve as support staff — secretaries, custodians, instructional aides, bus drivers, etc. — are as important in successful public relations efforts as members of the certificated staff.

Emotions affect perception

Trust is based on feelings. No matter how many facts you present, they will not be accurately “heard” unless the person receiving the facts is open to hearing them. If that person has had a negative personal experience with an administrator or someone else at a school, they will probably interpret any facts negatively. If they have had a positive personal experience, the reaction will probably be positive.

Speak directly

Printed materials are important tools, but they are seldom completely read. We all get a deluge of information every day, which means that we retain very few facts presented in written material.

Face-to-face and more personal communications works much better than written material. Use written materials as only one way to reach your audience. And be sure to write for them: know the reading level of the intended audience and write different types of materials for different audiences. To reach the most people, try to write to an eighth-grade level.

Find your key communicators

Identify the “key communicators” in groups you want to reach. Key communicators are the people who shape the attitudes of the rest of a group. Get to know those people first, and keep in touch with them. The key communicators need to hear from you and have conversations with you whenever something happens in your school that might be important to them and to the other members of their group. When appropriate, ask for their opinions. Ask them to help you tell others.

Establish a pattern and stick with it

Resist the urge to go back to hunker down during stressful times. Establish a system of communicating that includes all of your audiences and shares what they need to know and what they want to know. Find the ways to reach them effectively, and seek ways to listen to input. Doing this additional work upfront will ensure smoother operations and better relationships.

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant