

Positive Communication in School Leadership

**PASA WOMEN'S
CONFERENCE**

**BETH TRAPANI
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Goals for Today

- 1. Establish common understanding of best practices in school communication**
- 2. Discuss the importance of having communication plans**
- 3. Examine the basics of crisis communications**

Skills for administration

- Vision and Leadership
- Ability to build consensus
- Ability to manage change
- Ability to motivate
- Understanding school finance
- Understanding instruction
- ***Strong communication skills***

Good Communication Contributes to Student Achievement

- **Higher staff morale**
- **Increased parent satisfaction**
- **Better grades and test scores**
- **Fewer discipline issues**
- **Better community relations**
- **Higher functioning system**
- **Fewer lawsuits**

Communication is a Management Function

Everyone has to own it – but it has to come from the top

Should be imbedded in goals

Should be measured (since what's get measured gets done)

Should be funded

Communication is the cause of many breakdowns



Types of challenges you may encounter

- **Difficult coworkers**
- **Poor performance**
- **Too many demands/not enough time**
- **System failures**
- **Ambiguity over ownership of problems**
- **Lack of communication**

Good Communication is at the heart of *solving problems*

What does good communication look like?



Good communication is:

- **Open/Transparent**
- **Two-way**
- **Simple**
- **Diverse and Differentiated**
- **Well-timed**
- **Proactive**
- **Systemic**
- **Consistent**
- **Planned**
- **Truthful**

First Rule of School Communications:

Tell Your Staff, First!



Communicate
from the Inside
Out

Employees are front-line ambassadors and should almost always know first

Talk to your team, and be a listener

Create an open door culture - solicit input and foster involvement

Good Communication Guidelines

- ✓ **Communicate through eyes of the audience**
- ✓ **Consistent messages**
- ✓ **Multiple methods**
- ✓ **Be Proactive**
- ✓ **Questions to ask yourself**

Questions to ask:

Who needs to know?



What do they need to know or do?



When do they need to know it?



How will I reach them them?



How will I know if I did?

Every decision needs a communication component

- Communicate early and often
- Involve others
- Write it down

Once is almost never enough

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

- George Bernard Shaw

How will you reach them?

- Think about methods of communication (written, verbal, etc.)
- Frequency of message
- Contents of message
- Timing of delivery
- Messenger



Principals are Critical

- **Where the rubber hits the road**
- **Possibly the missing link**
- **Need for consistency – Everyone needs to be singing the same song**
- **What can be done to ensure consistency?**

How good communication can look for your team:

- ❖ The team is kept up-to-date on changes occurring in the department.
- ❖ Questions and feedback are solicited and when appropriate, are shared with the work group.
- ❖ Regular formal and informal meetings are held, and regular written communication is shared.
- ❖ Frequent face-to-face interactions
- ❖ Time is set aside for co-workers to communicate and ask questions.
- ❖ Agreement exists around expectations.

Everyone has a role...

Encourage staff to think about how their decisions and communications impact everyone...



**What makes you
want to work here?**



**What makes a
difference?**



**Who appreciates
your work?**



Morale

Avoiding a Created Crisis

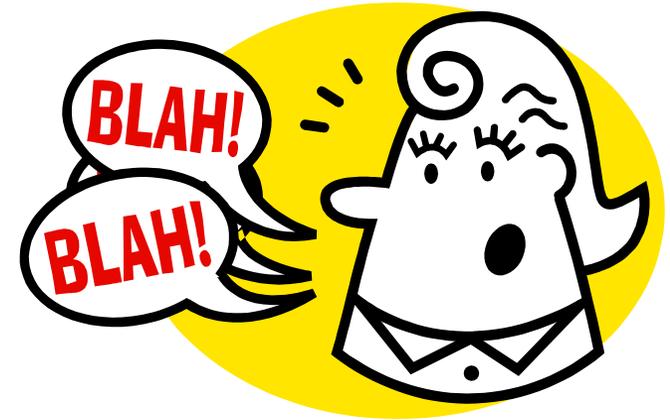
- Listen for the drumbeat of dissatisfaction
- Consider the implications of the change/decision
- Be willing to consider other viewpoints
- Have an implementation plan, a communications plan, and an evaluation plan
- Be willing to adjust course

Finding Your Inner Crystal Ball



Common Communication Mistakes

- Too many messages
- Too complex
- Too much Eduspeak
- One-sided (not really listening or seeking feedback)
- Don't consider the audience
- Assuming the audience has gotten the message



Explain things in language people can understand

“On this nationally norm-referenced standardized test, your child’s score fell at the 75th percentile.”

“Your child’s score was as high or higher than the 75 percent of students the same age, across the country, who have taken the same test.”

The Positive Spin

“I can’t send the grades until you sign a request form.”

“I’ll send the grades as soon as we receive your signed request form.”

“The program is closed to all students with failing GPA’s.”

“The program is open to all students with passing GPA’s.”

“I leave school at 3:30.”

“I’ll be at the school until 3:30.”

Communicating Bad News

- **Be proactive**
- **Offer follow-through/next steps**
- **Apologize if needed**
- **Offer hope/understanding/empathy**
- **Be clear and direct, yet compassionate**
- **Listen**
- **Offer support – find out what's needed**

Build an Issues-based Communications Plan

- 1. Determine communication goals**
- 2. Identify and prioritize target audiences**
- 3. Develop primary messages and content**
- 4. Determine method of message – including frequency**
- 5. Determine timing of delivery**
- 6. Establish criteria for measuring its effectiveness/
“checkpoints” and pulse checks**

Step 1: Determine Communication Goals

Who needs to know?

What do they need to know?

What are the key messages/themes?

Step 2: Identify and Prioritize Target Audiences

What do teachers/other staff need to know, and when?

What do parents need to know, and when?

What could go wrong?



Step 3: Develop messages and content

What will teachers be told?

How will you solicit feedback from them as the program advances?

The message to students and parents – *Consider the tone*

How will you monitor their feedback?

Steps 4 and 5: Method of Delivery and Timing

Consistent message, but multiple messengers?

Infusing the message into many layers of communication

Developing the right materials for each audience

Step 6: Taking the Pulse

How will you determine how the initiative is going?

What kind of feedback loops are in place?

How can you use what you learn for the next phase?



Lessons from the Trenches

- **Involve staff from the start**
- **Define responsibilities/roles**
- **Take time to listen**
- **Don't be too quick to rush to fix it**
- **Recognize staff contributions**
- **Always tell the truth**
- **Set communication expectations (timeline to respond, etc.)**

Communicating in a Crisis

- **Where there's smoke...**
- **Many different kinds of "crisis"**
- **Think about ramifications...**

Communicating in a Crisis

- **Get the facts**
- **Develop a quick plan, then a longer one**
- **Ask the 'if/then' questions**
- **Be proactive – Break your own bad news!**
- **Begin inside, if possible**
- **Include 'partners'**
- **Continue to update the plan**
- **Know when to call for help**

Timing is Everything



- **Get to your parents and staff before the rumors spread**
- **Beat the media to the punch**
- **Think about what else is happening**
- **Don't drop a bomb on a Friday afternoon**

Your role in a Crisis

- **Reassurance**
- **Protection**
- **Counseling**
- **Unifying presence and place**
- **Source of information**
- **Path forward**

Communicating in the good times

- Put yourself in their shoes (parents, staff, etc.)
- Research:
 - ✓ *How do people want information?*
 - ✓ *What do they care about?*
- Mixture of mass and personal/planned and situation
- Visibility
- Look for opportunities to connect

In Conclusion...

Stop to ask... *How am I communicating about this?*

Stop to ask... *What should everyone know?*

**Communicate Early,
Communicate Often, and
Communicate Again!**