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Communications training for principals

Communication can make or break a new principal. Good communication from the principal makes parents and staff feel like they are part of something great. Poor communication makes people wonder what, if anything, the school is accomplishing for students.

The bad news is that new principals don't typically get any formal training on being a communication leader for their school. The good news is that district staff can help them become good communicators quickly.

For those mentoring the new principal, start with the basics. One meeting at the beginning of the year and a couple of checkups can set a course for communications success. Ongoing communications support from the district will never disappear but it can decrease over time as the principal finds their groove.

What is news?

The first thing to cover with a new principal is the concept of newsworthiness. Breaking news is anything with a wow factor. In the news business they say "Dog bites man is not news. Man bites dog is news." Hopefully nobody is ever bitten by a dog at school. But the point remains, the more a school program or event seems unusual or innovative, the more likely it will be considered newsworthy. Not everything that happens at school can be made into sizzling hot news, but by focusing on the unusual aspects, the principal can create a news "hook" to grab the attention of the audience.

Sometimes all it takes is a little bit of digging and conversations with teachers to turn a mundane, perennial event like the first day of school into something newsworthy. So encourage the principal to look for something new or ask staff what is innovative in everything that happens in their building. What is new or different on the first day of school this year? Parents dropping kids off on the first day? No. Teachers welcoming their new students? Probably not. What about the new portable classroom for music education? Or the falcon that built a nest in the tree on the playground over summer break? If it is something new, it could be the news hook to draw the audience in to the story about the first day of school.

In a school, not all news is going to be wonderful to everyone who hears it. Sometimes a change is seen as a controversy or crisis by certain audience members. And that is OK. Oftentimes, tough issues can create an opportunity for the principal to show leadership in communicating news that not everyone wants to hear. She may not make people happy, but she will likely gain respect by being transparent.

In the case of tough news, the key is for the principal to be proactive and treat every issue as an opportunity to reaffirm the positive vision they have for their school. For instance,

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if a bullying problem arises, that is a great time for the principal to get the news out proactively with basic messages around the problem, the solutions being implemented and a reminder about the safe, welcoming environment that she is committed to providing at her school.

What channels are available?

Cover the various communications platforms or channels available for the principal including internal and external. Does the school have a parent newsletter? Staff newsletter or weekly email? Social media and web page? Go over the inventory of communications channels at the school. Next, talk about the district-level options available: Electronic newsletter, district web page, district social media, board meeting presentations, etc. Let them know if there are parameters on various district channels, for instance a newsletter that is just focused on student success or staff innovations, so they know the rules of the game and don't waste time submitting the wrong stories.

Remind them that communication is a two-way street. They need to think about what channels are available for them to hear back from the parents, students, staff and community partners. Do they want to get emails? Do they want to attend parent club meetings and neighborhood association meetings? Help them think about the ways they can receive as well as give information.

Finally, cover all of the community partner and professional channels available. Perhaps there are service clubs willing to help spread school news. Talk about local education reporters in the news media as well as cable access or other community-based news outlets. Some churches and local clubs are open to hearing directly from school leaders or helping spread school news via social media and newsletters.

Dealing with bad news

Make sure the new principal is armed with knowledge about common incidents that might become bad news in any given school year. Certain things happen almost every year: stranger danger incidents, a student or staff member is arrested, a student is injured in a crash, threatening or biased messages in graffiti, etc. Such issues are fairly common in school districts, but for the new principal this will be the first time they have been responsible for communicating about them. So, make sure they know the basic approach to dealing with such common issues and problems.

It is extremely helpful to cover the common pitfalls that can come with each of these incidents. Transparency is generally good, but there are times when investigations by human resources or police could be jeopardized by releasing too much information. For instance, let them know that in stranger danger cases, you will want to coordinate with the police before releasing suspect person or vehicle information. And in the case of students being injured or killed in a car accident, avoid violating health privacy laws. Such wrinkles can make the difference between making a bad situation better, or making it much worse for the school.

One of the most common pitfalls in any bad news situation is the error factor in first reports. Often, the first report is not 100% accurate, so the principal should be encouraged to fact-check, or have other staff do that, before releasing any information or responding publicly. It is much easier to delay the first communication than to try to correct bad information released too quickly.

When to call the district office

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One of the most important things to let the principal know is that the district office is there to support them. Let them know it is always OK to call the district office for support. In their first year, this could happen just about anytime something unusual happens, which is fine.

As the years go by and they become more familiar with the common issues, the principal will eventually learn how to handle the issues independently. But there are still times when they need to give a heads-up to the district office. Nobody likes surprises, especially unpleasant ones. So let the principal know when to call headquarters and what kind of information to be prepared to share. For instance, anytime parents go to the media with allegations of staff misconduct, let the district office know right away. If the local paper is covering a fundraising activity, it isn't necessary to call it in to headquarters.

If the principal notifies the superintendent's office when something sensitive may be in the news the next day, they can let board members and other community partners know. They can share the key facts of something before it is on the news. In certain circumstances, the district office will want to send out an email to all staff to let them know that the district is aware of the issue and working toward solutions before the news breaks city-wide. When in doubt, let HQ know.

Keep checking in

A new principal's first year is an important one for the students and the district. The district office can help make Year One a success by meeting at the beginning of the year and checking in periodically to offer guidance and support on communications, one of the most important aspects of the principal's job.

Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant