

August 2020

# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Communications staff must be part of the decision-making team

How does your district treat communications staff? Do they have a seat at the table when it comes to district decision-making, or are they on clean-up duty?

Unfortunately, communications specialists in some districts spend far too much time trying to “clean up” after communications fiascos rather than helping to shape the initial thought processes and messaging.

It’s much more effective when districts include their communications specialists on the district leadership team. They can help think through important decisions before they happen and help shape the action and the way they are presented.

### Communicating is a strategic activity

Some superintendents view communications as more of a task than a strategic activity. They think it’s enough to just send out a monthly newsletter and post a few photos on the district’s Facebook page. But effective communications involves so much more.

One of the most important roles of the communications specialist is to see the big picture. He or she can help leaders consider a decision both from the district’s perspective and help assess of how it will be perceived by different stakeholders. A savvy communications pro can help districts consider viewpoints and options beyond the obvious. That way, the district can make adjustments before a plan is presented, rather than do damage control afterward.

There are ways to avoid, or at least minimize, the backlash that can accompany unpopular decisions. But it requires knowing in advance the potential fallout and developing strategies for dealing with it. One way is by involving potential opponents in thoughtful discussion and idea-sharing before a decision is made when their feedback could be used to help shape the proposal and mitigate possible problems.

Another is to develop a communications strategy for a particular action, providing detailed information and rationale during the planning phase, so that stakeholders don’t feel a decision was “sprung” on them.

Districts with communications specialists have taken the first step in creating a solid public relations program. But it’s important to take the next step to include that position on your leadership team, where the communications specialist can provide research, strategic thinking, wise counseling and effective services to help meet the needs of the district.

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.

## Here are some tips to help communicators who want to be a valued part of the team:

The Decision-  
Making Team

August 2020  
Page 2

**Stay current on tools and trends.** Most people prefer receiving information electronically, but there is no one tool that's best to deliver it. New tools are available almost daily, and old tools are updated with new features. It's important to stay up to date and help your leadership team choose the best tools for a particular message.

**Educate yourself.** Professional development is as important for communicators as it is for teachers and principals. Make it a priority to attend conferences and trainings related to school communications. The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) offers an outstanding conference every July for school communicators, and there are local chapters in nearly every state. Be sure to share what you learn with your leadership team. You not only build support for new strategies or programs you might want to try but also confidence in your expertise and knowledge.

**Network!** Networking is a critical tool for cultivating fresh ideas and building community support. Cultivate relationships with community religious leaders, business partners, civic groups, parent clubs and others. The more you can involve your community during good times, the more likely they will also support you when times are tougher.

**Create a communications plan and share it.** Cranking out press releases and producing publications can feel productive, but without a master plan, it might be a lot of effort for tasks that aren't yielding the best results. Involve your stakeholders in setting priorities and creating your plan. Once you're specific about what you are trying to accomplish, you will be able to better target your audience and methods of communication. Most importantly, share your plan with district leaders. This will provide accountability and help them realize that effective communications is not a hit-or-miss proposition. It must be well planned and executed.

**See and be seen.** Visit schools regularly with camera in hand. Take photos to post on Facebook and the website. Gather stories you can tell to civic clubs. Make sure staff know you're there to help them.

**Coach and teach the team.** Share your knowledge and expertise with your administrative team. Meet at least annually with principals to review their communications efforts — newsletters, website, etc. — and offer suggestions. Maybe it's time to discontinue their printed newsletter and start a blog. Offer to create a school brochure that they can give to prospective families. Make yourself invaluable to them.

**Build trust.** In whatever you do, be direct, honest and reliable. Leaders need to have confidence that you are providing solid information and not just offering seat-of-the-pants recommendations. If you say you can complete a project by a certain deadline, make sure you deliver. Be someone your team can rely on for sensible, solid advice.

---

*Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant*