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## Speak carefully to avoid miscommunication

One of my mother's favorite sayings was, "Keep your words soft and sweet; you never know which ones you'll have to eat."

I often thought of that phrase when I advised school board members and administrators, "If you don't want to see what you say in print, don't say it. Be doubly careful not to include those remarks in a memo or email them to anyone." Before you say something, imagine the headline that might accompany the media coverage of your comments or the engagement it might generate on social media.

Remarks made and inadvertently broadcast have embarrassed elected officials and candidates on hundreds of occasions, and the internet allows them to be found easily and replayed repeatedly. A quick search on YouTube yields a long list of examples where a political figure, celebrity or someone who is very ordinary finds their remarks have gone viral — often with devastating personal, professional or organizational consequences. These are "hot mic" moments and offhand comments made without forethought.

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The following examples are among the most notorious:

In 2013, officials at Beth Israel Medical Center, New York City, learned that lesson in headlines nationally and internationally when heiress Huguette Clark died at age 104 after spending 20 years in the hospital's care. The officials' emails discussing and commenting on Clark's residency and potential contributions to the hospital were subpoenaed by unhappy relatives and published in news reports and broadcasts around the world.

There are, of course, countless cases of forgetting the microphone was hot when speaking "confidentially." Remember President George W. Bush's comment, caught on a live mic, about a reporter who was a "major league (bleep)"?

Presidential candidate Mitt Romney assumed he had a friendly audience at a campaign fundraiser when he made his now-infamous remarks about the "47 percent of the population" who will vote for Obama because they pay no taxes and rely on government entitlements. His comments were filmed by a food server and shared with Mother Jones magazine (<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/03/the-lesson-of-mitt-romneys-47-percent-video-be-nice-to-the-wait-staff/>).

Vice President Biden has been known to put his foot in his mouth throughout his term. There are well over 100,000 Internet search results for Joe Biden verbal gaffes. This was during his vice presidential term. The list is longer now.

Paula Deen battled fallout from racist comments she admitted to in a deposition. Her public image has been tarnished, and she has lost many of her endorsement deals.

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And don't forget Hillary Clinton's fundraising speech at a campaign event in 2016 when she described Trump voters as a "basket of deplorables." The phrase was repeatedly used against her throughout the campaign.

We've all said things verbally or in print that we didn't mean to say. Generally, these kinds of miscommunications are caused by unclear communication — by failing to determine who really needs to know, what they need to know and how best to tell them, or by failing to accurately gauge your audience's understanding of an issue. And we often don't give enough thought to how our words will sound to the listener.

Here are seven ways to help make sure the words you use convey the messages you want your audiences to hear and understand.

1. Check your policies and/or administrative rules to be sure they include guidelines for determining appropriate district/school spokespeople for media inquiries and the use of social media, especially email and Facebook pages or blogs the district or schools may have.
2. Remind all staff about these policies. Be sure they understand that anything they say or post using district equipment in their role as a district employee or using their district ID becomes a public record.
3. Actively listen to what you are being asked. Take time before you respond to find out exactly what the person wants to know.
4. If you are giving a speech, presenting a controversial topic in a public meeting or being interviewed, take time to anticipate the kinds of questions you'll be asked. Develop talking points to help you respond appropriately.
5. Share those talking points with staff in the district who may get similar questions so that your responses are consistent.
6. Keep your talking points and responses brief and relevant. If your response is simply and plainly stated, it will be more understandable and more credible.
7. Follow-up to find out if you were heard accurately, reported accurately and/or got the response you wanted.

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*Contributed by Jeanne Magmer, communications consultant*