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What school administrators need to know about PR to be successful

School administrators don't get a lot of training in effective communications techniques. Most learn on the job, yet research shows that the success of any leader depends on the quality of their communication skills. In surveys of business leaders, communication is consistently ranked one of the most important skills for employees. Within this ranking are interpersonal communications, listening, persuasion/motivation and presentation.

Successful communication is at least three-fourths of the job for any leader. In schools and public agencies, it may be even greater than that since almost everything a school administrator does is considered "public" and affects publicly owned resources and staff time paid for with taxpayer dollars.

Successful school administrators know that communication is much more than just talking to people or sending them a newsletter. Good public relations depends on building strong, positive relationships with constituent groups that include students, families, the business community, members of religious organizations and community residents.

Here are some core concepts that are necessary to the success of every school administrator. They are not listed in priority order. All are important.

Learn about people.

Understand people, what motivates them and how to reach them. A successful school administrator is part psychologist, part communicator and part business manager. First, know your audiences and where to find the members of those audiences and the most effective ways to listen to and speak to each audience.

Don't make assumptions.

Rather than guessing or assuming, be sure to actually find out what parents think and believe. A sure path to failure is to think you know about parent, staff and community opinions without really finding out. Administrators need to be able to motivate people, but they can't do that without understanding what mobilizes them. Proactively listen, watch, repeat. Ask the right questions and listen again. Look at body language. Consider a person's actions compared to what they are saying. Then test your perceptions and start listening and watching again. Taking time to do this is critical to your ultimate success.

Be a project manager.

Timing and planning are everything. Who you tell and when you tell them may be more important than what you tell them. If your timing is wrong, or if you tell the wrong groups in the wrong sequence, the results can be almost as bad, and sometimes worse, than not telling them at all. People who feel uninformed or "left out of the loop" may take actions that are

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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 staff. If the news is something that affects students and parents, they may be next in the sequence of contacts. If it affects volunteers, key communicators and others, 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.

What is your mission, and who will help you complete it?

Have a clear vision and mission, and articulate it so well that your “followers” rush ahead of you to carry it out. Make prioritized lists of what you need to do, and measure each action against how close it gets you to your goal.

Put students and those who work directly with them first on your list of those with whom you communicate. A successful administrator knows that staff must have information before the community and have enough background and details to help provide information to other groups and thus help shape attitudes.

Staff members are important members of your communications team.

All too often, the general public’s disenchantment with education or a given school starts with staff. Staff attitudes can shape all attitudes. One example: a research project found that half the adult population in this country did not believe that a diploma meant a student “knew the basics.” This belief, the survey also found, was rooted in the same perceptions shared by one-third of the teachers in this country felt the same way. The project demonstrated that the attitudes of the general public reflected the beliefs of those who worked in the schools. People believe teachers and other school staff members. The opinions and perceptions of staff members spread like wildfire.

Remember that staff members are not just teaching staff. The successful administrator knows employees who serve as support staff — secretaries, custodians, instructional aides, bus drivers, etc. — are as important components in successful public relations efforts as members of the certificated staff.

Adjust your own attitude.

Successful administrators don’t “head up” a community; they build community. They place a higher priority on what the school community wants than on what they personally want. When educators talk about community support, they are often talking about support for what they, their school or their district are doing. When the community talks about supporting schools, they are thinking in terms of having a voice at the policy table and being an integral part of the process.

A cohesive community has similar values, depends on one another, makes decisions together, and is committed to the good of the entire community. Ideally, each member believes that he or she is part of something larger than that person would be alone.

Feelings are important.

Emotions are more important than facts. The relationship built between a school administrator and any one person or group colors their perceptions toward the entire school district organization. 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 have a

negative view of the district. If they have had a positive personal experience, the reaction will likely be positive.

Direct communication is the most effective communication.

Printed materials are seldom completely read. If they do read something, it seldom changes their attitudes. Thus, they retain very few of the facts in written material.

Face-to-face communications work much better than written communications. Written materials are still an important way of presenting facts and assuring a consistent message; however, they are most effective when they come from someone who has first built a personal relationship with the readers.

If you use written communications, write different types of materials for different audiences. Studies show that nearly half of readers read below the ninth-grade level, about a quarter read at or below fourth-grade level and about a tenth read even lower than that. Yet most school newsletters are written for higher reading levels. Aim for an eighth-grade level to ensure that it is accessible to all. Your word processor can measure that for you.

Embrace transparency.

Resist the urge to go back to “old ways” of communicating. It may be tempting to withhold information, tell people only what they have to know, make decisions in isolation that affect others, and rely on written communications. This is faster in the short-term; however, the long-term consequences to your career can be disastrous when people do not trust you anymore. The extra effort will benefit you, your students, your staff and your school.

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