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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## An informed staff is essential to crisis communication

School staff are among your most important — but overlooked — audiences to inform during a crisis or constant change, like adjusting to a pandemic.

If staff learn about an incident or decision from the media or online before hearing news from you, you've eroded trust. And trust is essential to creating supportive staff that can counteract bad press and rumors.

Key concepts for effective internal communications:

- Don't leave anyone out — in fact, secretaries, bus drivers and other support staff are often the most believed information sources in a school district. And because they have lived in the community a long time, they tend to have a wider circle of influence.
- Employees should receive critical information in a timely, direct (face-to-face, if possible) manner, preferably from their front-line supervisor, such as a principal. Back up their messages with an intranet source with messages from the superintendent and board — and invite questions.
- If you want employees to behave like partners in a crisis, treat them like partners before, as well as during, a crisis.

Simply conveying the bad news isn't enough. Employees should learn the choices a school faces and understand why, such as switching to remote learning or shutting down for a day due to illness and quarantines. They should also be reminded about external crisis communication protocols in the crisis communications plan to keep messages consistent.

### Partners in managing your reputation

The objective of timely, direct crisis communication to employees is to enlist them in reputation management. They are your front line, even more than leadership. That can involve asking for advice and seeking specific assistance in crisis response, such as sharing anticipated parent reactions — so make them part of creating or refreshing your plan.

**Employees should respect protocols for who is responsible for external communications in a crisis, but you cannot expect them not to question decisions or offer alternative approaches.**

Because crises come in all forms and sizes, internal communication needs to be flexible and scaled to match the circumstances. Budget cuts and staff layoffs will send shivers throughout an entire organization and require intensive internal communication. If a situation involves

*(Over)*

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just one school, focus on the school with in-person communication while keeping information updated online for the entire district.

Crisis-generated chaos should never obscure the need for informed, appropriate internal communication — or be an excuse for not providing such communication. The superintendent or board chair's time may be better spent talking to the media, so someone else in the management circle must be delegated to inform and engage employees. That job is as vital as the job of communicating with the media.

A school district's reputation is inextricably tied to the reputation of its teachers and programs. It's a partnership that must be honored by timely, direct communication, which in complex crises demands ongoing updates rather than a one-and-done statement or video.

Management should cultivate employee engagement in an honest effort to improve — not as a “loyalty test.” Employees should respect protocols for who is assigned and responsible for external communications in a crisis, but you cannot expect them not to question decisions or offer alternative approaches. Effective internal crisis communication allows for two-way engagement and welcomes questions and alternatives, which often can improve the quality of a crisis response.

The reward for effective internal crisis communications is a more unified school district with greater respect for leadership from staff – and support from the community. How you respond to a crisis can bring you closer to the community ... and actually improve your reputation.

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