Effective Communication Techniques for the Board of Education/Superintendent Team

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About us...

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What we have here is failure to communicate.

--The Captain in *Cool Hand Luke*
Superintendents lose their jobs because of...

• #1--Loss of board confidence
  • Lack of communication, miscommunication, timeliness of communication
  • Relationship problems
  • Questions about integrity
  • Fiscal mismanagement
  • Political missteps
  • Unprofessional conduct

• #2 Significant board turnover with desire for new direction
Communication is key.

- 90% of superintendent’s time is spent communicating
  - 7:30 a.m. Attends local service club meeting
  - 8:30 a.m. Meets with secretary to review next Board meeting materials
  - 9:00 a.m. Meets with assistant supt. about upcoming negotiations schedule
  - 10:15 a.m. Goes to transportation dept to see new bus that was delivered
  - Noon Eats lunch at HS lunchroom with faculty
  - 1:15 p.m. Superintendent’s cabinet meeting
  - 3:00 p.m. Testifies at grievance hearing
  - 4:00 p.m. Meets with secretary to review next day
  - 4:15 p.m. Returns to office to answer phone calls and emails
  - 6:00 p.m. Supper with family
  - 7:00 p.m. Attends basketball game
To Communicate The Superintendent Must...

- Know Your Individual Team Members
- Know Your “Team”
“ME”
Steps in Activity

• Create “ME” (See handout)
• Share “ME” with the group
• Post the “Me’s”
Why a “ME”?

- Get to know board members on a more personal basis
- Board gets to know superintendent on a more personal basis
- Better understand each other
- Have something to talk with each other about
- Open up communication channels
“WE”
Steps in Activity

• Create individual “WE” (See handout)
• Share “WE” with the group
• Post the “WE’s”
• Create a team “WE”
• Consider having an “artist” or graphic design polish up the WE”
• Give to Board members, post in Board room
Effective school boards take part in team development and training most often with their superintendent.

Source: “Lighthouse Study 1”, 2001
Effective Communication Techniques for the Board of Education/Superintendent Team

Wordle
SAMPLE WORDLE
Board of Education and Superintendent Communicate Regularly

- What routine methods of communication has the superintendent established with the Board?
- What routine methods of communication has the Board established with the superintendent?
- How productive is the superintendent’s communication with the Board?
- How are his or her relationships with the Board?

Source: Charter School Governing Board Training Handbook
Communication plays as much of a factor in the departure of a superintendent as it does in his or her success.

Good superintendent/board communication plays an important and significant positive role in student achievement in a district.

Good communication does not just happen; it is planned and then executed.

A primary task in taking any system from good to great is to create a culture wherein people have a tremendous opportunity to be heard and, ultimately, for the truth to be heard.

--Jim Collins, Good to Great

Superintendent-Board Relations

• School boards lack training or capacity to develop productive, positive, and long-term relationships (results: high turnover of superintendents)

• Negative board-superintendent relations
  • Overload of information
  • Too much board involvement in administrative matters
  • Lack of board independence from superintendent
  • Haste by superintendent to resolve issues too quickly

• Good board-superintendent relations
  • Respect
  • Trust
  • Confidence
  • Support
  • Open communication

Source: “Local School Board Under Review”
While establishing strong lines of communication within our schools has always been essential for maintaining focus and for building momentum toward objectives, communication beyond our schools has become more important than ever.

Source: “Effective Communication That Drives Results”
Internal vs. External Stakeholders

**Internal**
- All Employees
  - Administrators
  - Teachers
  - Para-professionals
  - Student Services
  - Custodial & Maintenance
  - Food Service
  - Secretarial
- **Board of Education**
- Volunteers

**External**
- Families
- Community
  - Organizations
  - Businesses
  - Community Residents
- ____ County
- Media

Source: “External Communication That Drives Results”
Board/Superintendent Interactions

• Interactions with superintendent and individual board members and how superintendent responds to requests
  • Sets the stage for how superintendent is perceived
  • Sets the stage for how individual board members are perceived
• Importance of “equal-treatment”
• Uniqueness of the superintendent-board president relationship

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications
Board/Superintendent Interactions

Consider the unique needs of individual board members when working for “equal treatment and information”

- Avoid creating an “inner circle” within the school board
- Some board members may not be prepared for their roles
- Address individual board member requests by...
  - Letting all board members know when you receive requests for information and distribute information to all board members
  - Curb individual requests which reduces unmanageable requests that can waste time or divert the district from its mission

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Board/Superintendent Interactions

Equal Treatment Could be Unequal

• Consider the unique needs of the board members
  • Packets/Information
    • Figure out what works best for each member
  • Some may prefer:
    • Mailed
    • Delivered
    • Emailed
    • Picked up
  • Some may prefer information given via
    • Phone calls
    • Email
    • Face-to-face

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
The Most Important Relationship?

Board/Superintendent

• Determine...
  • The desired frequency of communication
  • Develop standards for communication (when, how)
  • Develop the agenda together (determine who works on developing the agenda)

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
The Most Important Relationship?

Board/Superintendent

Pitfalls to Avoid

• Not contacting president when serious issues arise
• Taking the president’s authority
• Failing to acknowledge the president for successes
• Failing to acknowledge the superintendent for successes
• Not referring board conflicts to the board president to avoid gossip between board members/superintendent
• Not maintaining full communication between board president/superintendent

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Relationships and Communication

• Positive working relationship between board members is essential to effective governance

• Relationships strengthened through training and team-building

• Disagreements are common

• Respect, clear communication, and self-control ensure better decisions and a stronger governing board

• Conflict and communication that results in personal attacks destroys group cohesion and leads to poor decision making

Source: Charter School Governing Board Training Handbook
Communication & Leadership

Board of Education and Superintendent Communicate Regularly

• Is the superintendent’s communication open and honest with the Board?
• Is the Board’s communication open and honest with the superintendent?
• Does the superintendent use technology to improve communication and record keeping?

Source: Charter School Governing Board Training Handbook
Communication & Leadership

Board of Education and Superintendent Communicate Regularly

• Is the superintendent effective in articulating ideas, needs, praise and constructive criticism?
• Is the Board effective in articulating ideas, needs, praise and constructive criticism?
• Does the superintendent listen effectively?
• Does the Board listen effectively?

Source: Charter School Governing Board Training Handbook
Communication & Leadership

• Means of communication is changing (phone-cell phone; memorandum-email)
• Need for meaningful communication remains constant

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Board/Superintendent Communication Plan

Form and Frequency of Communication

• Emergency Communication
• Normal Communication

Pros and Cons of Communication Forms

• Email
• Telephone
• Hard copy
• Face-to-face meetings

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Forms of Communication Between the Superintendent and the Board
Communication Tools

Communication between Board and Superintendent

• Email including weekly or biweekly updates
• Hard copy updates (weekly or biweekly)
• Phone conversations
• Face-to-face conversations

Source: “Communicating Effectively with Stakeholders,” Colorado Legacy Foundation; “Develop a Strong...”
Email Pros/Cons

• Pros
  – Easily produced
  – Efficient and quick
  – Preferred methods by most individuals
  – Provides documentation of communication

• Cons
  – Email is a part of public record
  – Some board members may see it as impersonal
  – Can be easily forwarded to others
  – Limits opportunity for expanded conversation
  – Can violate open meetings laws if sent to all board members simultaneously

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Email Recommendations

• Send out weekly school district updates to staff, community, parents
• Send out a weekly district update to Board members
• Use email to communicate during “crisis” situations (efficient communications tool)
• Distribute general school board information
• Do not put confidential information in email

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Phone Pros/Cons

Pros

– Provides quick feedback
– Reasonably efficient
– Offers personal touch to communication
– Provides opportunity to expand conversation
– Allows for confidential conversation

Cons

– Requires respondent’s availability
– Not as efficient as email (especially if multiple individuals need to be contacted)
– Hard to document content of conversation

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Phone Call Recommendations

• Use phone calls to add emphasis to an important message

• Superintendent calls board members to check in and see if there are questions about things going on

• Board members call superintendent to check in

• Consider district provided cell phones for board members to enhance communication

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Phone Strategies

• Establish preferred contact times with individual board members
• Establish a call log to confirm when conversations take place

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Hard Copy Pros/Cons

• **Pros**
  – Easily documented
  – Provides opportunity for attachments with scanning
  – More formal than email or phone communication

• **Cons**
  – Time consuming to develop and distribute
  – Reproduced easily (lacks confidentiality)

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Hard Copy Recommendations

• Send out hard copy of items which you want to guard against being widely distributed
• Send out thank you cards or birthday cards to board members to further build relationships
• Use hard copy to communicate all legal documents
• Over time move communications away from hard copy

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Face-to-Face Pros/Cons

• **Pros**
  – Most personal form of communication
  – Establishes rapport
  – Provides opportunity for further discussion
  – Provider greater opportunity to assess reaction (body language, facial expression, intonation)

• **Cons**
  – Time consuming
  – Inefficient
  – Can be difficult with detractors
  – Hard to document content of meeting

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Face-to-Face Strategies

• Important for important or difficult conversations
• Produce a summary of issues addressed and distribute

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Face-to-Face Recommendations

• Establish a regular timeline for each board member to meet with the superintendent to discuss important issues—
  – As a district are we aligning our operations with our vision, mission and goals?
  – Are we effectively measuring our performance against our vision, mission and goals?
  – What are the things you are excited about in our district?

• Use face-to-face conversations to communicate confidential information

• Superintendent should record in writing the outcomes of face-to-face conversations

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Emergency Communications

• Discuss as a superintendent /board team how board members want to receive emergency communication.

• Needs to be efficient and effective

• Rely on superintendent/board president relationship

• Establish emergency criteria to contact board

Source: “Effective Superintendent & School Board Communications”
Communication Tools—Board of Education Updates

- Notable Agenda Items
- Just the Facts
- Communication comes from district rather than the media
  - Eliminates rumors
- Immediate
  - Sent when meeting is completed

Source: “Effective Communication That Drives Results”
Communication

Tools—Board of Education Updates

Source: “Effective Communication That Drives Results”
Communication Tips

• Leadership (superintendent) must be available to answer questions, keep a pulse on the district and board, and deepen the board’s understanding of the system and how it works.

• Ensure communication is timely, targeted, and ongoing.

• Communicate information.

• Build on-going relationships between the superintendent and board.

• Communicate changes in the district.

• Use simple and understandable language.

• Do as much face-to-face communication as possible.

Source: “Communicating Effectively with Stakeholders,” Colorado Legacy Foundation
Communication & Leadership

• When problems arise, the people’s communication skills are tested

• Superintendents and boards cannot afford to ignore communication matters

• Superintendents and boards must hone their communication skills

• Poor communication causes relationships to deteriorate

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, *The Principal’s Guide*
Communication Model

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Feedback is Tricky in Written Communication

• Verbal and nonverbal clues are missing
• Clues are important to accurately decoding the message
• Reader’s emotional state when he/she reads written communication is important
• State of mind influences how messages are received and communicated

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
When using written communication...

• Be concise
• **Proofread** (Example—School Alerts)
• Use simple language
• Have a purpose
• Provide adequate time when a response is requested

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, *The Principal’s Guide*
Media and Richness

Quick feedback, multiple clues, tailoring of messages

Praise, encouragement, difficult conversations

Emoticons : ) : (

LOL

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Nonverbal Communication

- Touch
  - Handshakes
  - Shoulder pats

- Body language
  - Facial expression
    - Smiling
    - Glaring
    - Watching
    - Thumbs up
    - Head nods
    - Crossing limbs
  - Body movement
  - Tone
    - Volume
  - Pitch
  - Rate
  - Personal space

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Active Listening

• Listener focuses on understanding the speaker
• Avoids distracting nonverbal behaviors
• Don’t interrupt the speaker (allow others to speak their piece)
• Ask clarifying questions

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Difficult Conversations

• Require courage
• People tend to avoid having difficult conversations
• Speak so others can hear the message
• Clear the air and find resolutions
• Rehearse difficult conversations; script them out

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Completed Personnel Success Model

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Characteristics for Effective Communication

• Respect is essential

• Communicator must be believable & honor confidentiality

• People don’t have to agree, but must be open, direct & genuine

• Effective leaders possess impressive communication skills

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, The Principal’s Guide
Effective Communication Behaviors

- Be frequent
- Be positive
- Be honest
- Be prepared
- Be online
- Be humorous
- Be appreciative
- Be empathetic
- Be clear and concise
- Be truthful

Source: Sorenson & Goldsmith, 2009, *The Principal’s Guide*
Gumballs
Developing a Communications Plan

- **Purpose:** To keep the school community informed
- **Provide a clear and consistent message**
- **Questions to ask and answer—**
  - What are the main messages?
  - Who should hear these messages?
  - How would these messages be best delivered?
Learn to Speak English Again

• Place academic rhetoric on the shelf
• Speak and write on the level of those whom the message is intended
• Avoid acronyms and 50 cent words
• Utilize the **readability** feature of Microsoft Word
• Ask yourself, how would I explain this to my grandmother or to a group of third graders?
• **Use everyday language** (Example: Warren Buffet)

Effective School Boards Lead as a United Team with Superintendent

- Goodman (1997) concluded that districts with a strong board/superintendent relationship had greater student achievement
- Trusting and collaborative relations between board and superintendent
- Creation by the Board of conditions to allow the superintendent operate as chief executive officers
- Effective communication between the board chair and superintendent and among board members

Source: “Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards”
External Communication

Source: “Foundational Principles of Effective Governance,” Illinois Association of School Boards
Internal vs. External Stakeholders

**Internal**

- All Employees
  - Administrators
  - Teachers
  - Para-professionals
  - Student Services
  - Custodial & Maintenance
  - Food Service
  - Secretarial
- **Board of Education**
- Volunteers

**External**

- Families
- Community
  - Organizations
  - Businesses
  - Community Residents
- ____ County
- Media

Source: “External Communication That Drives Results”
Communication Tools--External

Communicating Beyond the Board/Superintendent

- Traditional Media: Newspapers, Radio, Television, Brochures/Flyers/Newsletters
- Community information nights
- Events (annual breakfasts, lunches, picnics)
- Tours of schools and facilities
- Workshops
- Videos
- FAQs
- Newsletters
- Website
- Facebook
- Twitter & Tweeting
- Chat Rooms
- Blogs
- Notification systems
- Google tools
- Wikis
- Polling and electronic surveying

Source: “Communicating Effectively with Stakeholders,” Colorado Legacy Foundation; “Develop a Strong...”
Board Connects with the Community

- Board engages on two-way communication
- Effective communication is essential to create trust and support among the community, Board, superintendent and staff.
- Board must be aggressive in reaching out to the community.
- Those who bring concerns to the board should be directed to the superintendent and staff.

Source: “Foundational Principles of Effective Governance,” Illinois Association of School Boards
Communicating with the Media

• Have a written policy
• Be aware of upcoming issues (local, state, nationally)
• Decide who will speak for the district on which topic
• Be accessible to the media
• Be accurate
  – Unable to respond due to legal considerations
  – Do not use “no comment”
  – Unable to respond because of litigation
  – If don’t know the answer, say so and say you will get them the correct information

Source: Iowa Association of School Boards
Communicating with the Media

• Don’t argue with the media (can’t win when people buy ink by the barrels”
• There’s no such thing as off the record
• Talk in real English
• Be fair (don’t play favorites with the media)
• Learn how to be interviewed
• Remember to say thanks for a job well done
• Can’t work around media

Source: Iowa Association of School Boards
Communication Recommendations

• Keep the website current
• Develop a marketing plan
• Update the community with quarterly newsletters
• Utilize and distribute a district calendar
• Develop community forums to tell the story
• Provide communication documents in multiple languages
• Reach out to churches, clubs (e.g. Rotary, Lions)
• Create district-wide performance events
• Establish regular board/administration dialogue
• Establish a superintendent communications committee
Assisting the Media

• Provide agenda materials.
• Provide a press release about important topics on the agenda
• Publish a “fact sheet” in electronic format on the website and in print (key information about district, schools, enrollment, principals, test scores, financial information)
• Develop a *Welcome to the Board Meeting* pamphlet
• Identify all members at the Board table with name placards

Source: “Welcome to School Leader,” NJSBA
Responding to Media Inquiries

Develop policy so that the district can...

• Be responsive
• Be accurate and direct
• Be accessible
• Be in touch

Source: “Welcome to School Leader,” NJSBA
Communication Strategies

- Keep communications simple
- Provide timely information
- Communicate early and often
- Communicate face-to-face
- Keep communication brief and to the point
- Emphasize customer service
- Train staff
- Develop relationships with the community
- Study the media
- Prepare messages

Source: “Hampton City Schools’ Communications Plan”
There can’t be too much communication!

Feel free to contact us...

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Potential Board/Superintendent Activities to Promote Team Building and Communication
Activity: Telephone

Source: “Welcome to School Leader,” NJSBA
Activity: Telephone

• What are the hazards of relying on “telephone” as a means of communication?
Activity: Charades

• What is the result of relying on “charades” as a form of communicating?
Activity:  Pictionary
Activity: Pictionary

• What is the result of relying on “pictionary” as a form of communicating?
Activity: Human Knot

Source: “Welcome to School Leader,” NJSBA
Activity: Human Knot

• What does it mean to work as a team?
• What role did communication play in the activity?
• What did you learn about yourself in this activity?
Potential Movies/Videos

Source: “Welcome to School Leader,” NJSBA