

ON-DEMAND PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SERIES



EPISODE 12

Communicating Effectively with Groups,
Key Individuals, and Difficult Characters



EPISODE 12: Communicating Effectively with Groups, Key Individuals, and Difficult Characters

doodles and notes

Many of the most important aspects of a school's work require the skill and wisdom of diverse individuals and teams with varied skills and experiences. This type of work design holds at once great promise for high-performance and great probability for misunderstanding, misconception, misdirection, and unneeded conflict. In fact, given the complexities involved in sending and receiving even simple messages, it is astounding that communication occurs at all. It is even more astounding that it can and does occur with clarity and positive effect. Think of all the steps involved in the one-way communication of a single, simple, spoken message.

7 LINKS IN THE CHAIN:



1. The sender forms, from trillions of possible neural connections, a thought to be communicated.
2. The sender translates the thought into language by choosing words and combining those words in such a way as to represent the thought.
3. The sender augments the words with tone, pace, pitch, volume, and inflection to further clarify the expression of the thought.
4. The sender adds non-verbal cues to the message to add even more meaning- eye contact, facial expression, gestures, posture, and movement.
5. The receiver's eyes, ears, and other senses then receive the flood of incoming information (the words + the verbal cues + the nonverbal cues) and send it on to the receiver's brain for interpretation.
6. The receiver's brain extracts meaning from the incoming information by de-coding the words and interpreting the added non-verbal information.
7. The receiver's brain then adds in assumptions, values, beliefs, past experiences, and current context in order to construct additional layers of meaning from the communication.

Note that, at each step of the communication process, there is an opportunity for a break in the chain. If we also factor in the speed at which the back and forth of conversation occurs, the added complexity of multiple communicators, and the occasional layer of extra-emotional content, it seems a small wonder that the chain ever holds together.

Education leaders can become more effective communicators by simply being more aware of the links in the chain, appreciating some of the complexity involved, and developing their skills. Many of the skills involved in effective communication are simple and straightforward. A few are more advanced and require more time and effort to develop. Everyone can learn to be a more effective communicator and a more influential person.

“Leaders who refuse to listen will soon find themselves surrounded by people with nothing to say.”

Andy Stanley

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SUCCESS PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH GROUPS

When one thinks of themselves in the role of public speaking and presenting, it is natural to imagine that this is a relatively rare occurrence that is usually done by professionals or people with exceptional natural skills. In fact, school administrators engage in public speaking and presenting on a daily and routine basis. Anytime a school administrator communicates with a group in a public setting, they are engaged in public speaking and presenting. Faculty meetings, grade level meetings, parent gatherings, PLC meetings, leadership team meetings, school board meetings, awards ceremonies, graduations, and numerous other impromptu gatherings are all venues that require skills in public speaking and presenting. Some people do seem to have high natural abilities in this area. Fortunately, public speaking and presenting are learnable art forms. School administrators can increase their effectiveness through preparation, feedback, and practice.

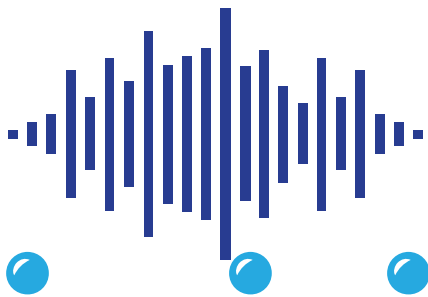


All audiences are distractible

The human brain can process information much faster than anyone can speak. A public setting provides less accountability for the listener than a small group or one-to-one setting. Therefore, public speaking is a contest of attention. Effective speakers know that it is practically impossible to keep another person's attention. Rather, they seek to gain the listener's attention, then regain it, again, and again.

Use a structure

Even a short presentation will benefit from a framework. People remember information best when it is embedded in a narrative format. A story, riddle, anecdote, idiom, analogy, or metaphor makes the presentation difficult to forget.



Three Pearls

Identify the three most important and memorable aspects of the communication. Place one at the beginning of the communication; place one at the end of the communication; and place one just a little past half-way through the communication.

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

George Bernard Shaw

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SUCCESS PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH KEY INDIVIDUALS

As important as public speaking and presentation skills are, one on one communication remains the workhorse of information flow in any organization. Education leaders who excel at this crucial skill do so to the great benefit of the adults and students they serve.

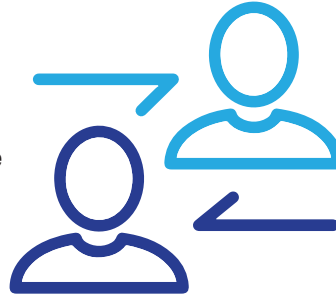
Practice assertive communication

Assertive communication emphasizes high and equal consideration for the message and the receiver of the message.

Passive communication overemphasizes care for the feelings of the sender and receiver of the message and underemphasizes the message itself.

Aggressive communication overemphasizes the importance of the message and underemphasizes care for the participants.

Passive-aggressive communication, perhaps the most insidious combination, feigns care for the participants and attempts to manipulate rather than communicate.



Match verbal and non-verbal communication

Humans are adept at spotting small incongruencies between what is said and the non-verbal cues that accompany what is said. When the two don't match, we are keen to believe the non-verbal components over the verbal information.

Practice abundant communication

The more communicating time that is spent with each key individual, the better the individual will be at interpreting and understanding the communication. As key individuals become more and more accustomed to a leader's communication style, sense of humor, common gestures and/or phrases, they are less and less likely to misunderstand a message on a more sensitive topic when that conversation is necessary.

“Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to, it creates us, it makes us unfold and expand.”

Karl A. Menniger

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SUCCESS PRINCIPLES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH DIFFICULT CHARACTERS

Avoid binary thinking

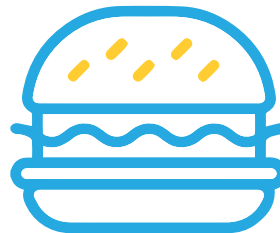


Binary thinking is the human brain's survival response to an urgent, complex, and emotional situation. Our brains attempt to simplify the choices down to just two. Fight or flight. Good guys or bad guys. Right or wrong. For me or against me. In or out. In a true life or death situation, our brain's ability to cut through the complexity and provide a single choice between two clear paths is an amazing and valuable skill. This can be problematic when the situation involves emotions that activate our binary response, but content and

context that require more thought, insight, and options- such as most school administration situations. A fundamental skill in effective problem solving is our ability to recognize binary thinking when it arises and make a conscious choice not to limit ourselves to the quick, one way or the other, responses to situations that require better and deeper thinking. Effective communicators know that binary thinking exists, understand its purpose, and avoid it when necessary.

Use an "I message"

This communications technique is also called the "Hamburger" technique. The hamburger analogy refers to the technique's approach to surrounding the meat of the message with two softer, easier to digest buns. Here's an example... instead of using a *you message* such as... "*Tom, you're late for work again. If you don't start caring more about your job, you may just lose it.*" Switch to an *I message* and surround the meat with two buns... "*Tom, when the B hallway is unsupervised in the morning (Bun), I am concerned that something may happen that could have been prevented with supervision (Meat). How can we improve on this? (Bun).*"



Another advantage of an *I message* is that it is less arguable than a *you message*. In the example above, the implication that Tom doesn't care about his job invites disagreement. The assertion that "*I'm concerned that something may happen,*" being a statement about oneself, is less arguable.

“While no single conversation is guaranteed to change the trajectory of a career, a business, a marriage, or a life, any single conversation can.”

Susan Scott, author of the national bestseller *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*.

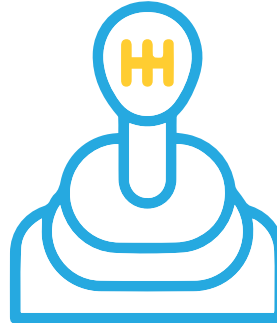
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Content-Process Shift

Another effective way to avoid binary thinking is to shift the conversation away from the content, and the tension that it is producing, to the larger purpose that makes the content relevant. Then, when both parties are more conscious of their mutual purpose, reenter the content of the conversation.

For example, in a disciplinary hearing, an effective principal might say *“Mr. Jenkins, I feel the frustration building in myself and perhaps you do too. Let’s stop talking about your son’s possible suspension for just a moment and reestablish our purpose for having this meeting. We disagree on some important issues, but we also share an important goal—doing what’s in the best interest of your son and the school he attends. Let’s take a breath, and if you’re willing, let’s keep talking and see if we can design a solution that can work.”*



Notice that the principal shifted the conversation temporarily away from the content, reestablished the mutual goals of the meeting, and then shifted back to the content. In the best-selling communication book *Crucial Conversations—Tools for talking when the stakes are high*, the authors call this strategy Step out / Reestablish mutual purpose and mutual respect / Step back in (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzer, 2002)

From Former CEO of Air Canada, Claude Taylor: *“Certainly, a leader needs a clear vision, but a vision is of little value unless it is shared in a way so as to generate enthusiasm and commitment. Leadership and communication are inseparable.”*

Access to the entire KACTE/KDE On-demand Principal Leadership Development Series is available at: www.kyacte.org and www.education.ky.gov/CTE

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Bibliography and Additional Resources

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