REFEREED ARTICLE

Effective Communication in Schools

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Abstract

Schools are complex, dynamic systems that require effective communication to meet the diverse needs of its stakeholders. Communication is essential to maintain healthy relationships between the students, faculty, and parents. Establishing effective communication practices in a school requires understanding the characteristics of communication, including the benefits and common barriers. The three critical components of effective communication – trust, transparency, and active listening – build the relationship necessary to engage in challenging conversations.

Effective Communication in Schools

Effective leadership in education, as a teacher or administrator, requires excellent communication skills and a willingness to engage in challenging conversations. Schools have many stakeholders: students, teachers, administrators, and families. Each group has high expectations of the educational system, and fulfilling those expectations depends on excellent communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal (Glaze, 2014). The benefits and barriers to effective communication need to be understood in order to develop and promote the practice. All three essential components - trust, transparency, and listening - must be established. The characteristics of each stakeholder relationship pose unique challenges and recommendations.

Benefits and Barriers of Effective Communication

Communication is the transmission of information from a source to an audience. Effective communication requires that the audience understand the message in its intended form (Fashiku, 2017). Challenging conversations include elevated emotions, differing points of view, and a resolution valued by at least one participant (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). People communicate both directly and indirectly. Direct communication is intentional, while indirect communication includes expressions, physical behaviours, and speech patterns (Bender, 2005). Awareness of indirect communication and active listening are essential components of face-to-face conversations (Tyler, 2016). For communication to be effective, we must be mindful of our message and indirect communication, actively listen, and engage in challenging conversations.

Education is continually changing, and effective communication builds the positive school culture required to implement change (Hollingworth et al., 2017). The primary relationships in most schools, apart from the teacher-student link, are among staff, administrators, and parents (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). When implementing new programs or initiatives, these stakeholders' voices disappear without established relationships and effective communication (Safir, 2017). Staff need to feel heard and valued to welcome change, and change without consultation alienates veteran teachers. Effective communication promotes motivation and builds staff culture, while poor communication creates dissatisfaction (Tyler, 2016). School culture influences how the organization responds to change, and unwillingness to accept change accompanies poor morale (Hollingworth et al., 2017). Leaders who choose to ignore staff feelings of apprehension will spend more time dealing with undesired behaviours (Brown, 2018). Engaging in challenging conversations by using effective communication and listening is necessary to implement changes that enable school improvement (Ontario Principals' Council,

2011). Communication and relationship with stakeholders are more effective methods of school improvement than new policies or programs (Safir, 2017).

The benefits of challenging conversations are clear, yet barriers exist that keep educators and administrators from engaging in these conversations. There is an apprehension of challenging conversations because they can be unpredictable and emotional (Brown, 2018). The prospect of managing upset or aggressive people is one of the most daunting parts of engaging in difficult conversations (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). The cultural norm of being nice hinders our ability to have tough conversations or give honest feedback (Brown, 2018). People often lack clarity in their communications in an attempt to be kind, but a clear message is more kind than an ambiguous message. Leaders often avoid challenging conversations due to fear of damaging relationships, fatigue, misinterpreting the significance of the issue, or lack of confidence in their skills (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). The intent of the communication can be complicated when the participant's lack of skills obscures the intended message (Bender, 2005). It is critical that body language and manner of speaking match the intention and set the desired tone. The absence of tough conversation can lead to passive-aggressive discussions occurring behind the scenes (Brown, 2018), so we must work to overcome the barriers to effective communication.

Essential Components of Effective Communication

Trust is the first of three essential components to build a relationship capable of engaging in challenging conversations effectively. People earn trust through daily interactions that demonstrate they listened and cared, not through grand gestures (Brown, 2018; Tyler, 2016). Building trust is comparable to building interest in a bank account; it takes time and requires commitment (Safir, 2017). Each interaction is a bid for acknowledgment; if the experience is positive, trust grows, but if it is negative, it depletes the previous balance. Staff must believe they are in a safe space, where they will not be ridiculed for making mistakes, in order to engage in difficult conversations (Brown, 2018). If mutual respect, collaboration, and trust in leadership are already the norm, it is much easier to engage in challenging conversations (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). After establishing a trusting relationship, retracting the statement if the other person gets defensive is not necessary (Safir, 2017). The relationship creates an environment for the participants to examine the reaction and express their thinking. Critical conversations, while using the essential components of effective communication, can repair previously damaged school cultures (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Trust is the first critical element needed to build the relationship necessary for effective communication.

Transparency underpins trust, because it demonstrates the stakeholder's purpose, goals, and values. Transparent leadership leads to increased productivity because the employee's focus is in better alignment with leadership goals (Lavoie, 2015). Stakeholders seek transparency in the organization's directives and vision because they have experienced overwhelming changes and lack of focus in the past (Llopis, 2012). Leaders who are open and transparent about their struggles are more relatable to employees. During the low points, honesty encourages stakeholder trust in future decisions (Llopis, 2012). Challenging conversations are most successful when the parties involved have a clear vision and are open about their intent (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). Without clear communication with staff, changes feel forced at the last minute (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). In-person communication is more transparent, because people can read indirect communication, and this leads to fewer misunderstandings (Llopis, 2012). Transparency is key to building the earned trust needed for effective communication.

The final essential component of effective communication is listening. There are two types of listening: deep listening wherein the expectation is to hear concerns but not solve the problem, and strategic listening that involves guiding questions and suggestions (Safir, 2017). Strategic listening is active; it requires the listener to ask relevant questions and clarify the

message (Bender, 2005). Behaviours that inhibit effective communication include judgment, offering unwarranted advice, lack of confidentiality, and interrupting the speaker (Brown, 2018). Ineffective communicators often ask whether there are questions but do not leave adequate time for people to respond. Awareness of indirect communication is also essential; gestures or body language can signal to the other person to finish speaking (Brown, 2018). Listening is the foundation for productive responses during difficult conversations (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). When involved in a difficult conversation, it is vital to resist the urge to respond before listening. Another component of effective communication is listening to criticism or feedback, especially when it is difficult to hear (Brown, 2018). The goal should be to create a culture in the classroom and school whereby active listening and engagement in collaborative conversations are expected (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). Trust, transparency, and listening – the three essential components of effective communication – must be present to achieve a collaborative culture in a school.

Effective Communication Between Stakeholders

Education contains a variety of unique relationships, each with its own communicative needs and characteristics. The primary relationship in school is at the classroom level. Communication at this level serves two functions: to support the teacher to meet the learning outcomes and to build a relationship between the participants (Fashiku, 2017). Classrooms must be a place where participants can be vulnerable and know that they will be safe (Brown, 2018). Creating a relationship with students is vital, but that relationship needs to be intellectually based and not focused on building a friendship (Safir, 2017). Adults and students have different roles and levels of status in the school, even with open communication and established relationships. Challenging conversations with students, including honest feedback, often begin with the student perceiving the message negatively (Judkins, 2019). The purpose of the conversation is to encourage the student to develop beyond what they feel is possible. Teachers must be mindful of student non-verbal communication, in order to understand the student's thoughts and feelings (Safir, 2017). Active listening and emotional intelligence are crucial for identifying and understanding students who have experienced trauma. Establishing and maintaining a classroom with effective communication supports teachers to accomplish the goal of meeting the learning outcomes while creating positive connections.

A faculty is much like a classroom: there are individuals with various personalities and communication styles that must work toward a common goal. Discussions with colleagues can be intimidating. It is essential to express ideas clearly and not take exception when others do not share points of view (Judkins, 2019). When a colleague's disagreement occurs during a presentation or meeting, it is acceptable to ask for further discussion in the future. Experienced teachers may view colleagues who support new programs or initiatives as challenging their experience and methods (Steen, 2017). Colleagues do not require the same deference as administrators or parents, but teachers should still practise effective communication techniques to promote a positive relationship (Bender, 2005). Apathetic colleagues require set deadlines and clear guidelines; it is possible to avoid difficult conversations if everyone in the group is aware of their role and the purpose it serves. Dominant colleagues do not process subtle messages; therefore, they require responses with clear boundaries. The essential elements to remain assertive are knowing the facts, maintaining focus, finding common ground, and staying calm (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011). It is advisable to document conversations with authoritative colleagues in e-mail records or meeting minutes (Bender, 2005). Collaboration is necessary for growth, and communication promotes effective collaboration.

Honest conversations between administrators and staff are the prerequisite for growth. Growth occurs through reflection, and effective communication can reveal diversions from the goal in a teacher's practice (Safir, 2017). Both teachers and administrators must learn to listen and reflect on feedback, both positive and negative (Hollingworth et al., 2017). Resistant or

under-performing staff need to engage in difficult conversations with administrators. Participants should paraphrase the concerns during the discussion, in order to ensure active listening and to clarify the message (Tyler, 2016). This technique also helps the participants to remain mindful and keep them from becoming defensive while receiving feedback (Brown, 2018). Teachers must remember that difficult conversations are part of the administrator's job, and they should avoid venting frustrations to colleagues or creating an adversarial environment (Bender, 2005). Teachers are more likely to adopt the recommended changes if the relationship with the administrator is strong, and they feel safe and heard through the conversation (Hollingworth et al., 2017). Positive staff relationships form when teachers feel appreciated, and their strengths are acknowledged. Honest conversations must occur between teachers and administrators; effective communication is key to maintaining the relationship.

The final relationship to be examined occurs between the school and the parents. The teacher's ability to communicate effectively is the essential resource to create a strong partnership between the school and the family (Gartmeir et al., 2016, p. 207). This relationship contributes to the students' increased academic success. To establish this relationship, teachers should inform parents at the start of the year of their expectations, support them when they assist, and thank them for their effort (Bender, 2005). Parents are more supportive when teachers ask for input about their students' strategies and listen without becoming defensive (Judkins, 2019). Teachers engage in difficult conversations with families for a variety of reasons. Highly demanding parents require the teacher to inform the parents about whether their requests are realistic, and connect them to other professionals for additional support (Gartmeir et al., 2016). Communicating with an overly protective parent necessitates patience, reassurance, and composure (Bender, 2005). Staff may need compromise when dealing with angry parents, in order to avoid a power struggle. If a solution is not evident, both parties may find common ground in a goal for the student. Teachers who discuss parent communication techniques with their colleagues report increased confidence in their communication abilities (Gartmeir et al., 2016). The characteristics essential for positive staff-family conversations are positive relationships, transparency, and cooperation. All school-based relationships require effective communication in order to fulfil the prime function of the school.

Conclusion

Excellence in education stems from high-quality stakeholder relationships, and communication is the key to building these relationships (Wieczorek & Manard, 2018). Effective communication creates positive school cultures wherein staff can adapt and embrace change. Increased skill in all components of effective communication decreases the fear associated with challenging conversations. Trust is essential to build strong relationships among stakeholders. Clarity of intent increases transparency, and active listening supports people to process feedback and implement changes for growth. These essential characteristics build the strong stakeholder relationships necessary for productive schools focused on improvement. Communication will enable the maintenance of relationships while delivering honest assessment, challenging colleagues, engaging in difficult conversations, and creating partnerships with families.

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