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## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes School Leaders Make and How to Avoid Them

*Winning communication is the result of making small, insignificant adjustments in what you say and how you say it.*

—Paul W. Swets

**W**ords have power. They can be helpers, healers, revealers, and eye-openers—or they can be dangerous and hurtful weapons. That’s why what people say and write to each other and how they say it is incredibly important. Educators know this better than anyone.

Education is communication. It’s what school leaders do for a living. While the average person may speak and write up to 18,000 words each day, that’s just a warm-up for most administrators and teachers, who are constantly communicating with the school’s multiple and diverse audiences. If they



## 2 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

do it right, their words inform, instruct, inspire, and, sometimes change lives forever.

When school leaders communicate effectively, students learn, parents and community members understand and support what the school is doing, and the process of teaching and learning moves forward. But when educators fail to communicate fully, misinformation, misinterpretations, misunderstandings, and mixed messages can cause the system's wheels to spin or come off altogether.

Unfortunately, even professionals don't always get it right. That's why it should come as no surprise that administrators and teachers sometimes have difficulty sending clear messages. Even the best school leaders don't always know the right thing to say or how to say it. Educators can have as much trouble communicating clearly as anyone else. Sometimes, more.

### **THE TOP TWENTY REASONS EDUCATORS FAIL TO COMMUNICATE**

How many times have students in your school misunderstood directions or left class with no clear idea of the next day's assignment? How many kids are confused about exactly what behavior is expected, preferred, accepted, allowed, or valued in your school? If pressed, how many of your staff members would admit to being unclear about what the school's real priorities are? How many parents have left a parent-teacher conference in your school wondering if they had just received good news or bad news? Finally, how many times has a bond issue or referendum failed in your district because school officials didn't get their message across to taxpayers?

Unless you work in some kind of educational utopia, the correct response to all of the above is, "Too many!"

In a school environment, communication is the lifeblood of teaching and learning. Edu-leaders wear many hats, but first and foremost, they must be good communicators. Yet all educators fail to be understood sometimes. A few even make

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 3

a habit of it. If you think it doesn't happen in your school, you're not paying attention.

It's not that school leaders intend to be obscure. Most try extremely hard to communicate about problems and solutions in clear-cut and meaningful ways. Yet many people (kids and adults alike) think that educators speak some goofy foreign language all their own ("educationese"). It's not uncommon for laymen to wonder just what educational leaders are really saying or talking about.

Mixed messages, confusing signals, and murky meanings don't have to happen in schools. But they do. Every day. Why is that?

As it turns out, there are twenty common mistakes that most often cause school leaders to communicate ineffectively. Superintendents make them. Principals and teachers do too. Fortunately, all are avoidable or correctable. After all, communication skills are learned, not God-given.

Here they are—the top twenty most serious communication mistakes educators make today (no priority ranking is intended or implied):

1. *Overreliance on jargon.* School leaders know a special language of technical, professional, and scientific (or pseudoscientific) terms. Unfortunately, kids, parents, and community members don't. When educators use too much insider talk they leave others out.
2. *Walking on eggs.* Educators love to soft-pedal issues and pussyfoot around touchy topics to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. It doesn't work. ("You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs." —Anonymous)
3. *Bending over backward to be politically correct.* By taking extreme measures to avoid offending anyone's sensitivities, educators can end up saying too little, saying the wrong thing, or saying nothing and appearing ridiculous in the process. Neutered communication is often ineffectual communication.

#### 4 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

4. *Too much formality.* When school leaders talk like a textbook, it turns others off and comes across as distant, aloof, and stuffy. It's OK for professionals to talk like real human beings and to use shirtsleeve language to get their points across.
5. *Overgeneralization.* Educators know better than anyone that all kids are different, that labels don't always fit, and that glittering generalities often confuse and mislead. Yet many persist in using them. Generalities don't work and people resent them. Specific facts and examples are still the best tools for breaking down communication barriers.
6. *Sermonizing.* There's a difference between teaching and preaching. When school leaders cross the line, communication always suffers. Kids, especially, tune out pontificating.
7. *Obfuscation.* Like politicians, educators are notorious for making things vague. It drives pupils and patrons nuts. When people want to pin you down, let them. That's when real communication takes place.
8. *Practicing dogmatism.* Being dogmatic is easy, but it doesn't facilitate communication. Nobody likes or listens to a "know-it-all," even when it's a superintendent, principal, or teacher. Effective school leaders help people discover information, answers, and solutions, instead of shoving material down their throats.
9. *Patronizing.* Talking down to students, staff members, parents, or community members is a surefire way to make them deaf to your message. Students, in particular, may not know what patronizing is, but they know they don't like it and they won't respond to it.
10. *Making empty threats.* An empty threat is a promise that can't be kept. Some educators aren't above using them

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 5

anyway. A prime example is when school administrators and board members “threaten” the public with unlikely larger class sizes if they don’t vote for increased funding. Likewise, teachers sometimes threaten classes with unrealistic penalties. Such false threats are transparent. People recognize them for what they really are—lies. Threats that everyone knows can’t be delivered destroy credibility. Real threats and real consequences get real results. Phony threats only cause people to disbelieve or to quit paying attention altogether. So much for communication.

11. *Whining.* Too many educators whine too much. It’s a self-defeating communication strategy. School leaders may have a lot to complain about, but sniveling and seeking sympathy doesn’t help. You can invite people to a “pity party,” but most won’t show up. Whining isn’t communication. It’s just an irritation.
12. *Grammatical and/or spelling errors.* When a superintendent, principal, or teacher sends out a memo or gives a speech full of errors, people pay attention. They talk about the mistakes; they remember them. And they forget what was really said. It happens more often than you think. Nothing kills credibility faster than simple mechanical mistakes. People notice. It makes a difference. When an audience is hung up on mistakes, it won’t get the message.
13. *Lying and denying.* It’s always a mistake for a school leader to lie. Fortunately, it doesn’t happen often. What does happen with some frequency is a lot of educators doing a lot of denying. To the public, it’s the same thing. Denying problems, failures, or mistakes that others know are real makes a leader look like a liar, a fool, or both. It’s the worst communication mistake school officials can make. You can’t be a believable leader and be in denial at the same time.

## 6 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

14. *Communication overload.* Some educators practice communication overkill. They routinely tell their audiences a lot more than they want, need, or deserve to know. There's a limit to how much listeners and readers can absorb, assimilate, and sort out. Too much information is as bad as too little. As an example, parents want to know how their kid is doing. They don't care to know all about the history of testing or the intricate norming procedures involved. The sooner that school leaders learn this lesson, the better their communication will be.
15. *Overuse of slang.* Some educators think that using teen slang makes them hip and strengthens communication with kids. Since the slang of youth changes rapidly and erratically, they also run the risk of not keeping up, misusing terms, and appearing foolish. The truth is that kids and grown-ups alike expect school leaders to talk like adults. That's why most communication experts agree that slang is most effective when used sparingly for emphasis.
16. *Showing off.* By definition, educators often have a greater-than-average vocabulary and a command of specialized terms in their discipline. Consequently, some feel a need to flaunt their vocabulary to demonstrate competence and superior knowledge and to validate their status as an authority figure. They're wrong. Using big words and exotic phrases only comes across as showing off and makes the audience less receptive to your message. Regardless of your status, using recognizable words in recognizable ways is always the best way to guarantee understanding.
17. *Being cute.* Some young educators today think that a good way to build rapport and improve communication with students is to be cute or funny. Most veteran school leaders know better. "Cute" is a tiny target. If

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 7

you shoot for it and miss, you can quickly be perceived as nerdy or pathetic. That's not the image of an effective communicator.

18. *Using profanity.* Profanity has shock value as an attention-getter, but shocking people isn't always the best way to communicate with them. When used by a school leader, profanity often embarrasses or offends people and makes it more difficult for them to take what you say seriously. Even in today's permissive society, being professional and being profane usually don't mix.
19. *Overfamiliarization.* Occasionally, school personnel make the mistake of becoming too familiar in communicating with pupils, parents, and patrons. They feel it makes them appear more chummy, accessible, and approachable. Actually, it only makes them appear out of bounds. Feigning intimacy, assuming a friendship or closeness that doesn't exist, or becoming flirtatious are things to avoid. Phony familiarity is dishonest and undermines the trust necessary for effective communication. In most cases, kids and adults have enough pals, buddies, or confidants. What they need are teachers, counselors, mentors, and leaders. That's you. Act like it.
20. *Using sexual innuendos.* Surprise! There are still some real taboos in our culture. This is one of them. Sexual hints, suggestions, and references or double entendres by school officials often make others uncomfortable and send up red flags that make effective communication difficult. It shouldn't happen in schools, but it does somewhere every day. Just check your daily newspaper for the latest story about sexual harassment in schools. Don't let it happen on your watch.

That's the list—the twenty worst communication mistakes school leaders tend to make. These aren't the only costly blunders

## 8 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

educators are guilty of, but they are the most serious and the most common.

When you or other school leaders fail to communicate, it is usually traceable to one of these failings. Avoiding them is the first step toward saying the right thing in all school situations.

In most cases, all it takes to sidestep these pitfalls is paying attention, being honest, using plain talk, exercising common sense, showing empathy and practicing a little old-fashioned humility. If these aren't enough, the remainder of this book spells out more specifics in terms of school-tested tips, techniques, and strategies for always hitting the mark in communicating with students, parents, peers, the public, and the media. Saying the right thing in all situations isn't always easy, but it is always possible. The following pages can show you how.

Although all of the miscues above need to be addressed to ensure effective communication, some demand special attention. It should come as no surprise that hiding behind technical mumbo jumbo is one of them.

### THE JARGON TRAP

Every profession has its own insider technical language. Education is no exception (see examples in Box 1.1). This jargon serves a worthwhile purpose as a shorthand or code for communicating about professional and technical topics among colleagues. It serves little or no purpose, however, for communicating with those outside the profession.

Using too much jargon can be interpreted as a sign of arrogance. Some professionals (including some educators) use it just because they can, not because it helps them communicate better. Occasionally, practitioners fall prey to the jargon trap because it makes them feel important and part of a select group.



**Box 1.1 Educational Jargon: A Short List**

Jargon is constantly changing as buzzwords come and go. The list below is intended only to be illustrative, not exhaustive or absolutely up-to-the-minute.

Accountability Affective domain Alternative assessment techniques AP classes Assessment-driven instruction Authentic assessment Block scheduling Bloom's taxonomy Carnegie units Cognitive learning Competency-based instruction Conflict resolution training Contract learning Cooperative learning Criterion-referenced tests Curriculum mapping Diagnostic teaching Divisional organization Emotional intelligence ESL (English as a Second Language) Flexible scheduling Focus groups Gender-fair programs GPA (grade point average) Grade equivalent scores Graduation standards Homogeneous grouping IEP (Individual Education Plan) Immersion programs	Interdisciplinary instruction Integrated learning systems Kinesthetic learning Learner impact statements Learner outcomes Left brain/right brain Mainstream Management by objectives Multicultural instruction Multisensory approach Norm-referenced tests Outcome-based education Peer coaching Percentile Postsecondary Profile of learning Resource-based instruction Rites of passage Schools-within-a-school Scope and sequence Shared decision making Site management Standard deviation Strategic planning Synthesis Teacher assistance teams Total quality management Whole language instruction Zero-based budgeting
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## 10 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

### Box 1.2 Jargon Versus Plain Talk (An Example)

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*Jargon:* On this nationally norm-referenced standardized test, your child's score fell at the seventy-fifth percentile.

(Huh?)

*Plain Talk:* Your child's score was as high or higher than seventy-five percent of students the same age across the country who have taken the same test.

(Wow!)

When administrators and teachers hide behind jargon, it comes across as rude or snobbish. It doesn't work! Making people feel inferior or left out isn't a sound basis for developing mutual trust and close communication.

Using professional jargon with nonprofessionals isn't cute or clever. It's insulting, insensitive, and intimidating. If you really know what you're talking about, you can make your meaning clear without resorting to elitist jargon.

No matter who your audience members are, they deserve the truth in understandable terms, not mumbo jumbo. Effective school leaders never use "educationese" with nonprofessionals when simple words will work better. That's almost always. (See illustration in Box 1.2.)

If you have to use technical terms with pupils, parents, or patrons, be sure to define the words, explain them, give examples, and allow questions. This isn't just the best way to use jargon with people outside the profession; it's the only way.

While confusing laypeople with technical "educationese" is a major cause of miscommunication by educators, clouding issues with euphemisms may be even worse.

### **EUPHEMISMS FEEL GOOD, BUT DON'T SEND A CLEAR MESSAGE**

Most dictionaries define *euphemism* as the "act of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for one considered more harsh,

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 11

blunt, or offensive.” Based on this definition, educators are notorious euphemizers.

When you want to be liked, admired, accepted, and respected (as most administrators and teachers do), it is difficult to be the bearer of bad news. That’s why many educators resist accusing students of suspected wrongdoing. That’s why they don’t like to tell parents that their child acts like a jerk. That’s why they are reluctant to talk about touchy topics such as physical abuse, drug use, homosexuality, or pregnancy. That’s why administrators are uncomfortable when discussing sensitive personnel subjects such as an employee’s drinking problem or the possibility that a teacher may be unfit for the profession.

Educators don’t like to say bad things about anyone or anything, so many don’t. Instead, they search for a kinder, gentler way of saying what needs to be said. They mumble. They mutter, they obfuscate. They camouflage their point with euphemisms (see Box 1.3). But hiding the truth doesn’t make it go away.

The trouble with euphemisms is that they distort and dilute reality. They can leave false impressions or mislead people into thinking things are different or better than they really are. Some euphemized messages are so muted that they have no impact at all. That’s not communication. It’s a cop-out.

Of course, it is commendable to be considerate of others’ feelings, but it’s never considerate to speak or write in such vague or veiled terms that important messages don’t get through. Too often euphemisms intentionally miss the mark when bull’s-eyes are really needed.

The most effective school leaders aren’t afraid to be honest even when it is painful or unpleasant. Problems don’t get solved until someone is willing to speak frankly about them. The school’s public is never well served by being deceived.

## 12 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

### Box 1.3 Euphemisms Commonly Heard in Schools

Educators don't always say what they mean. Do you? Below are a number of euphemisms commonly heard in schools every day. If they don't sound familiar, you just may not be listening to your staff or yourself.

<i>What Is Said:</i>	<i>What Is Meant:</i>
Your child doesn't always distinguish between fact and imagination.	Your kid lies.
Your child needs improvement with motor skills and coordination.	Your child is a klutz.
Your child uses physical means to get attention or make a point.	Your child fights.
Your child has leadership skills, but needs to use them more constructively.	Your kid is a bully.
Your child lacks maturity.	He/she acts like a baby.
Your child needs more appreciation of time and punctuality.	The kid is always late.
Your child needs to develop better social skills.	Your child is gross.
Your child needs guidance in following practices of good hygiene.	Your kid is dirty.

Plain speech isn't always pretty, but it clears the air and gets the right message across. It communicates. That's what school officials are hired to do. It's fun to be Mr. Nice Guy, but it's better to be a real leader doing real communication.

When searching for the right thing to say, the best advice is to use euphemisms sparingly. Try the truth instead. It's hard to improve on honesty.

### TOO MUCH POLITICAL CORRECTNESS CAN SEND WIMPY MESSAGES

In recent years, the overuse of euphemisms by school personnel has risen to almost epidemic proportions out of a growing concern over political correctness.

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 13

Modern-day Americans have gone crazy over political correctness. Educators may be even crazier than most. Whole curriculums have been purged to root out any perceived ethnic slights or slurs. Classics have been rewritten to eliminate any hint of offensive language or references. Worthwhile books have been banned because of alleged insensitive or injurious terms. Some educators are now afraid to say, write, or use anything that isn't absolutely innocuous and inoffensive. This makes communication, both in and out of the classroom, like walking through a minefield in constant fear of triggering a blowup.

Some school leaders today have become so afraid of offending minorities, protected classes, or others that they refuse to say anything that isn't 100 percent acceptable to everyone. This means that important messages often get undersaid or go unsaid altogether. We've all heard jokes about ridiculous extremes in political correctness such as referring to the bald as the "folliclely challenged." It's no joke, however, when school leaders feel they can't say what needs to be said because of paralyzing concern over political correctness. Consideration for others is good. Caution is good. Paranoia isn't.

There's a fine line between a sense of respect and a persecution complex. Too much emphasis on political correctness can lead to silly, insipid, phony, or obscured communication. Runaway political correctness neuters expression.

For example, several school leaders across the country have said they will ban Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* from the curriculum because it offends some minority patrons. Sacrificing the exposure of large numbers of students to one of the greatest achievements in American literature just to satisfy the hypersensitivity of a few minority representatives is a classic illustration of excessive political correctness.

School leaders should always apply reason and fairness to what they say, but they shouldn't become so fearful of possibly offending someone that they can't communicate honestly.

Just as the best educators don't back off from touching or hugging kids who need it out of fear of sexual harassment

## 14 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

charges, good school leaders don't forsake the truth just because they don't want to be labeled as politically incorrect. Sometimes, the right thing to say is what's real, not just what's the most politically acceptable.

### **HOW STRAIGHT TALK CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER SCHOOL LEADER**

When educators fail to say the right thing, frequently the problem is that they have forgotten the power of straight talk. "Telling it like it is" still makes a difference. This means minimizing the use of jargon and euphemisms and not letting an obsessive concern with political correctness cloud essential meanings.

If you want to become a better school leader, try harder to communicate with each separate constituency at their level, using real words they understand. You may not sound as professional, Pollyannaish, or politically appropriate, but you will send clear messages. That's what counts.

When it comes to making the most of plain talk, many school leaders could take a tip from Minnesota politics. In November 1998, Jesse (The Body) Ventura, a former professional wrestler, Navy SEAL, bouncer, bodyguard for the Rolling Stones, small-town mayor, and radio personality, was elected governor of Minnesota by beating out two formidable, lifelong professional politicians.

As a first-time candidate for state office representing a low-budget third party, Ventura defeated the son of a political legend whose father was a former vice president of the United States on the Democratic ticket and a popular Republican mayor of the state's capital city. His victory wasn't a fluke, a joke, or the result of a voters' revolt. It stemmed largely from relying on straight talk.

Throughout the campaign, Ventura addressed voters in straightforward fashion using everyday language, admitting ignorance when appropriate, refusing to make promises he

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 15

couldn't keep, indulging in refreshingly candid self-directed humor, speaking with honesty, and sticking to the truth.

By contrast, his opponents hedged on some touchy issues, spoke to voters using traditional political "doublespeak," relentlessly reiterated historic party lines, and came across as stuffy, self-righteous, and out of touch. (Does this sound like any educators you've ever known?)

Over time, the voters tuned out the professionals and began listening to the outsider who told it like it was in no-nonsense language, emphasizing common sense over conventional wisdom. Ventura's simple, to-the-point message was welcomed as a fresh breeze blowing through a campaign haze of politicized and polluted hot air.

Ultimately, Ventura shocked the established pundits by winning the election. Straight talk worked for Jesse Ventura. It can work for you as well. It may not get you elected to public office, but it will help you become a more effective educational leader.

What Ventura realized, which his political opponents didn't understand and too many educators forget, is that communication isn't about the sender. The purpose of effective communication isn't to make the speaker or writer sound good, look good, or feel good. It's about being understood and believed by the receivers.

When administrators and teachers tell it like it is using language that is readily understood, students learn more, follow directions better, and are more likely to make positive behavior changes. Likewise, parents become more willing and effective partners with the school because they understand what's going on and why; the public supports the school with greater vigor because it really hears and grasps the school's message; and the media treat the school fairly, because reporters feel they are dealt with honestly.

Straight talk makes a difference because it saves time, eliminates confusion, builds trust, and establishes credibility. Best of all, it is understood and believed! This makes straight talk too good a deal for you and other school leaders to miss out on.

## 16 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

Learning to communicate plainly and honestly is a key to professional success for school leaders. Knowing the right thing to say in every situation isn't magic. It's not a gift. It's a trait that can be acquired only through conscious effort and hard work. Straight talk is more than borrowing someone else's words. It is a skill developed by steadfastly searching for the simplest and sincerest way to communicate in your own words to a variety of specific audiences.

The skill of plain talk is rooted in an understanding of what works and what doesn't in getting across to students, parents, co-workers, the public, and the media. It means making it a habit to make your point clear.

The strategies laid out in the following chapters can give you all the necessary tips and tools to become a better straight-talk communicator, no matter what audience or situation you are dealing with. When that happens, you will have become a better school leader at the same time.

### **WHEN THE RIGHT THING TO SAY IS "NOTHING"**

While embracing the value of straight talk, school personnel also need to realize often there is one communication tool that is even more powerful and effective: no talk at all.

We all know administrators and teachers who believe they are perpetually obligated to say something. They feel compelled to always make a point, teach a lesson, or impart "wisdom" (whatever that is). Unfortunately, they are missing the point of communication. It's supposed to be two-way. More often than most of us think, "nothing" is the right thing to say. Silence often speaks louder than words.

It is no secret that a lot of educators tend to talk too much. Every day, all school leaders have countless opportunities to shut up. The best make the most of all of them. Listening is the unspoken secret to successful communication. You can never learn to say the right thing every time until you learn to really



## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 17

listen first. Examples of common situations when nothing is the best way to communicate include

- When you don't fully understand what is expected
- When the other person is merely venting feelings, not seeking information or advice
- When all that's needed is support, not feedback
- When you are angry or otherwise unable to remain objective
- When you don't know what to say
- When you've already said too much

When weighing what to say, it always pays to remember that the clearest, most long-lasting, and best-remembered messages are those that people discover for themselves.

### **MORE "MUST-DO" TIPS FOR ALWAYS SAYING THE RIGHT THING**

Whether it is avoiding jargon, eschewing euphemisms, or just "listening up" more, becoming a better communicator is not a matter of a major makeover. Improvement is incremental, resulting from simply learning to do a lot of little things just a little bit better.

Examples include the following steps that have helped many successful school leaders learn how to say the right thing. They can help you as well. They all work. They're all doable. But they won't make any difference unless you apply them. The best time to start is now:

- Remember that when you communicate with students, you are the adult. When you communicate with adults, keep in mind that you are the professional. Your words should match your role. (The Bible has it right—"When I was a child, I spake as a child. When I became a man, I put away childish ways.")

## 18 How to Say the Right Thing Every Time

- Tailor your communication to specific listeners or readers. Communication must be audience-appropriate to be effective.
- Take a tip from the Golden Rule. Communicate with people the way you want to be communicated with.
- Don't worry too much about maintaining the image or mystique of what you think an educator is supposed to be or sound like. Talk like a real person. Real people in your audience will appreciate it.
- If you can't be anything else, be clear. The gift of a good leader or teacher is the ability to make complex subjects clear, simple, understandable, and less intimidating. Effectiveness is not measured by the quantity of polysyllabic words used, but by how much of what is said or written is really understood.
- Talk *to* people, not *at* them.
- Shy away from sarcasm, put-downs, insults, and name-calling. Cheap shots are almost always costly.
- Don't say anything that you (and your audience) know is phony.
- Remember the power of civility. If they cause you to become angry, you lose your audience even if it's only one person.
- Lighten up and tighten up. Don't take yourself too seriously and don't drone on and on!
- Give real reasons for action, not just policy references.
- Answer the questions that are really asked, not just the ones you want to answer.
- Make sure that your mouth, your eyes, and your body are all saying the same thing.
- Be consistent. Tell all groups the same thing—but in ways that are most meaningful to each individual constituency.
- Remove physical and psychological barriers between you and your audience. Get out from behind the desk. Look at your audience. Lean toward your audience. Get as close as you can—just don't get in their face.

## The Twenty Biggest Communication Mistakes 19

- Get to the point.
- Follow the “KISS” principal advocated by AA— “Keep It Simple, Stupid.”
- Be respectful. It’s the only way to earn respect yourself.
- In all you say or write, remember that shorter is better.
- Remember that half-truths are also half-lies. Avoid them.
- Say what needs to be said as soon as you can possibly say it! Read this again. It may be the single most important guiding principle for school leaders who want to be better communicators.
- If what you have to say doesn’t add anything, don’t say it.
- Listen to yourself. If you don’t like what you hear, do something about it.
- Listen to how the leaders you admire most express themselves. Emulate what works. There is no copyright on saying the right thing.
- Dare to be passionate about your values, beliefs, priorities, and what you stand for. Passion is persuasive.
- If it doesn’t feel right, don’t say it.

If you have ever had trouble knowing what to say to students, parents, or the public, the starter suggestions above can help you avoid similar embarrassment in the future. And it keeps getting better.

Each of the following chapters contains more specific guidelines, models, suggestions, and school-tested examples to equip you to communicate effectively with all groups in all situations. It starts by understanding how to get through to today’s students.