

The Communicator

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“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.”

—Covey (1990, p. 255)

I recently had my annual eye exam and while the doctor was adjusting his high-tech equipment to examine the inner workings of my eyes, he asked me what kind of books I wrote. I was impressed that he had taken the time to read the registration form I'd completed and told him that I wrote for educators—mainly, school principals.

“Do you have children in school?” I asked.

“Oh, yes,” he answered, and told me their ages. His children were doing well, he assured me, but he was concerned about the principal. The doctor's diagnosis—inability to communicate.

He explained: “The consensus in my neighborhood is that he doesn't know how to listen. If you have a concern or a problem, you get a fifteen-minute appointment during which the principal talks “at” you. Then he glances at his watch, apologizes for having to end the appointment, and you're ushered out.”

I could tell what he was thinking: “Even my bedside manner is better than that.” And he was right.

Stephen Covey (1990) calls communication “the most important skill in life” (p. 237), and the 108 individuals who responded to the survey I sent out agreed with him, giving *the ability to communicate* more votes than any of the other thirty-seven traits listed. Successful principals are communicating virtually 100 percent of the time they are on the job—listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Even when they don't think

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“The message is the message received”

—Diekman (1979, p. 21)

they’re communicating, they are. How they stand, how they shake people’s hands, and even what they wear send messages to the people in their school community. Communication is “the sending and receiving of messages both verbal and nonverbal” (Diekman, 1979, p. 4), but just because a message is sent and even seems to have been received, is no guarantee that the communication is effective.

No matter how clear, direct, and seemingly incontrovertible what we communicate may seem to *us*, we are really only communicating *our* perception of the subject under discussion. And if our goal is to be effective communicators, we must continually seek to understand what the individuals across the table from us are thinking and feeling, particularly if they were the ones who came to see us in the first place.

The average principal conceivably communicates with thousands if not tens of thousands of individuals during a school year. The formats and the forums are varied: writing a newspaper column, presiding over graduation exercises, reporting to the board of education, visiting with parents at open house, addressing the student body during an assembly. Each individual who reads or listens to what the principal has to say forms an opinion and makes a judgment. “He’s a straight shooter,” says one parent about the principal. “She’s nice,” says a student. “He’s fair,” says a teacher. “She’ll give you an honest opinion,” says a colleague. “OK, but I don’t understand a word he says,” observes another parent. Many principals are probably unaware of how frequently what they have to say as well as their communication styles are the topics of conversation when teachers, parents, and students “dish” about the principal.

The number one priority of a principal’s job description is to communicate in appropriate, productive, meaningful, helpful, and healing ways with teachers, students, parents, colleagues, as well as a vast array of others, whether individually, in small groups, or en masse. The message is unmistakable: If a principal can’t communicate—with people of all ages, socioeconomic and educational levels, and every color, race, and creed—going to work every day will be both painful and unproductive.

The principal with the brusque “bedside manner” may well be a caring and committed educator who knows a great deal about curriculum and instruction. Unfortunately, all of his knowledge won’t do him much good, if he can’t or won’t take the time to listen.

Listening attentively and empathetically to the concerns and problems of people is just part of what Communicators do. Highly effective principals also write newsletters, sell bond issues, summarize school improvement plans, tell stories, talk with parents about discipline and

achievement concerns, share information at staff meetings, mentor teachers, teach lessons, chair committees, conference with teachers, counsel with students, present workshops, recruit volunteers, bargain new contracts, interview candidates, write grants, and motivate students.

The highly effective principal is a Communicator—a genuine and open human being with the capacity to listen, empathize, interact, and connect with individual students, parents, and teachers in productive, helping, and healing ways, as well as the ability to teach, present, and motivate people in larger group settings.

COMMUNICATOR EXEMPLAR: MICHELLE GAYLE

Michelle Gayle has been the principal of Griffin Middle School (776 students) in Tallahassee, Florida, for two years. Since transferring from an elementary assistant principal's position she held for two years, Michelle hasn't missed a beat. She owes her quick, smooth start to her top-notch communication skills. She is relaxed with adolescents, empathetic with parents, and forthright with teachers.

Michelle's mantra when it comes to communicating is "Open and honest, no matter what." Many administrators love the "honest and open" approach when they are the ones "telling it like it is," but Michelle is always willing to hear the truth from others; "the good, the bad, and the ugly," she calls it. She constantly seeks out reactions, perceptions, opinions, and input from everyone in her school community.

Here are just a few of the ways that she seeks to understand what people are thinking and saying about Griffin Middle School:

- She interviews students and parents who are transferring out of Griffin to private, home, or public schools (both in and out of the district). "I ask them to share something positive about their experience at Griffin as well as the one thing they would tell me, now that they don't have to worry about any consequences."
- She routinely calls parents at random to ask them what's going well at school for their students, what they appreciate most about the school, and what they would change if they could.
- She asks all teachers, parents, and graduating eighth graders to evaluate her performance, using a district-designed instrument plus three open-ended questions she has added to the evaluation: What do I do that

"Nature has given us one tongue, but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak."

—Epictetus

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you value? What do I do that you don't appreciate? What else would you like to share with me that will help me grow as a professional?

- She makes a point of talking with parents when she meets them outside of school. She always asks how things are going and if they have any suggestions. She immediately feeds back the positive comments to the teachers via E-mail.

Effective communication is a two-way process, and after Michelle listens, she always has something to say that's worth hearing. She characterizes her communication style as "hands-on" but what she really means is "face-to-face." She is one part mother, one part grandmother, and one part preacher. Your mother lays it on the line, your grandmother loves you to death, and your preacher lays down the law. Michelle seems to do all three simultaneously.

She moves effortlessly from counseling with parents to schmoozing with students, to talking instruction with her teachers. With parents, Michelle actively listens and empathizes. "Number one for me is respect," she says. "I want the parents of my students to feel the respect I have for them. If they can sense in what I say and how I say it that they are partners in what we are doing, they will be more willing to trust the way I handle difficult situations. I also want them to know that we support them—that whatever is going on with their children and in their families, we will be there to help."

"If you don't stand sincere by your words how sincere can the people be? Take great care over words, treasure them."

—Lao-Tzu (6th century BCE/1988)

Michelle's communication style with students is impromptu and even a little goofy sometimes. "If I see students I want to chat with, I'll slip up alongside of them in the hallway and make my conversation as unobtrusive as possible. Middle school students can't stand to be in the spotlight so I try to make my communication style fit their needs. I might say softly, 'I heard about your mom. Is there anything I can do to help?' or 'I'm sorry about that math grade. Let us know if you'd like some help raising it.'"

Michelle is one of those people who just exudes energy, especially early in the day. She's out at the student drop-off area on most mornings, talking to kids, chatting with parents, and even waving to perfect strangers on their way to work. She wasn't sure how her sleepy students would react to her bright and early exuberance, but she's discovered they're paying attention even when she thinks they're not. "I'll come up with a crazy word for the day. For example, we have different schedules for different days of the week and I'll think of a good word that starts with "B" for a "B" schedule day. At first, I thought maybe I was going too far with my silliness, but then

later in the day when I was in a classroom and the teacher used the word, one of the students said, "That's Ms. Gayle's word from this morning."

Michelle knows that you can't fool middle schoolers. "I'm the real me wherever I am and whomever I'm with." With middle school students, flexibility is the key, and Michelle's motto is "Be ready for anything."

"These kids have so much going on internally. One minute they're on top of the world. Next minute, they don't know what's going on. They don't mean to be that way. This is just where they are." Obviously Michelle adores them, but that doesn't mean she cuts them any slack for their behavior. She is quite comfortable gathering the boys in the gym to talk frankly about the dress code or pulling all of the girls into the auditorium to address issues of sexual harassment.

She is as empathetic and energetic with her teachers as she is with parents and students. She enjoys putting teachers in groups—not "feel-good" groups, as she calls them, but groups in which folks may disagree strongly with one another.

"I think it's important for teachers to learn how to communicate with the people they don't necessarily see eye to eye with. I tell them, 'I want to hear the good, the bad, and the ugly.' If we don't get the truth out, we're just playing feel-good, happy games, and that doesn't help anybody."

Griffin Middle School's current academic focus is reading: The entire staff received seventy hours of intensive training associated with the Florida Reading Initiative over the previous summer. Michelle is constantly on the lookout for teachers who are implementing what they learned in their training. "I do a daily E-mail bulletin to the teachers with the usual announcements about meetings, substitutes, and deadlines. But I generally include one or two Hats Off announcements that highlight something positive I saw, related to the reading initiative. Now I have teachers E-mailing me with invitations to their classrooms." Michelle chuckles at her cleverness. "I know they just want to make the Friday Focus."

Michelle has a vision for raising communication to a new level in her school. She explains, "Although Griffin Middle School has always enjoyed a rich tradition of excellence, it really didn't have what I'd call a true middle school mindset. People were divided into departments, and they didn't necessarily speak the same language about students and instruction. My goal is to help people appreciate the value of teamwork and recognize the power of collaboratively wrestling with issues related to teaching and learning. I'm encouraging them to work together in groups and to observe one another's teaching and then talk about what they've seen."

Michelle isn't just *listening* and *talking* to teachers. She's communicating in other ways as well. She wants her teachers to keep on learning, and to that end she has been putting articles and information in their mailboxes.

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She says, “I read a lot . . . a real lot. One of the things I pride myself on is reading and sharing. I’ll ask teachers, ‘Can we get together and talk about this for five minutes?’”

One of Michelle’s teachers observed, “I haven’t read this much since graduate school.” Effective communication is two-way, however, so it wasn’t until a teacher shared an article with Michelle that she knew her message about reading and sharing had been received and understood. “I was almost in tears,” she said. “It was a wonderful moment.” Communicators are like that. They love the excitement and energy that is generated through what Harriet Lerner (1991) calls “the dance of connection.”

COMMUNICATOR BENCHMARKS

The connections that Communicator principals make with the students, parents, teachers, and other individuals who pass through their lives each year may number in the tens of thousands. Many of these interactions are heartwarming and memorable, others are filled with tension and uncertainty, but Communicator principals survive and thrive on this whirlwind of words by keeping it simple. They know that above all else, they must attend, listen, seek to understand, empathize, tell the truth in love, and make connections, for “communication seems to work best when it is so direct and so simple that it has a sort of elegance” (Kotter, 1996, p. 89). The following Communicator Benchmarks are guaranteed to result in “elegant” communication.

1.1 Communicators Attend

Attending is not going to football games, concerts, and fun fairs, but rather the first and most basic task of being a helpful, healing, and productive communicator. Monitor yourself or others during most interactions, and you will notice how rare it is that people are being fully attentive to one another. While addressing you and purportedly listening, a friend may also be engaged in a number of simultaneous activities—looking over your shoulder, waving to someone walking by, or rustling through papers. Such divided behavior hardly inspires your confidence, nor do you get the feeling that you are all that important to your friend during that moment in time.

We are all tempted to multitask, but effective principals have learned, sometimes the hard way, to give those with whom they meet their complete and undivided interest. They use their bodies, faces, and eyes to say, “Nothing exists right now for me except you. Every ounce of my energy and being is focused on you.” Successful principals structure their one-on-one

meetings with individuals in an atmosphere that is free from interruptions. They hold their conversations at round tables where they can sit side by side (or face to face). They never sit behind their desks. They clear away clutter and remove distracting items from their desks and tables. The same electronic devices that interfere with the operation of an aircraft during flight also interfere with effective communication in the principal's office. Communicators turn off their telephones, computers, cellular phones, palm pilots, pagers, CD players, and any other electronic communication devices. They know how to focus on a real person for a face-to-face conversation for as long as it takes to make a connection. They recognize the healing and helping power of attending to people, particularly those who are troubled or distraught.

"Listen a lot, speak a little.
One word is enough to
make a lot of trouble.
A fool speaks a lot, a
wise man thinks
instead.
One word is as good as
nine."

—Finnish proverb
(Sawyer, 2001, p. 59)

1.2 Communicators Listen

Activator Exemplar Todd White was only twenty-eight when he was named the principal of San Souci Elementary School in Greenville, South Carolina. He says, "I learned how to listen from the teachers there. They taught me to sit down, look people in the eye, and listen to them." Sometimes, his teachers had to tie Todd down to get his attention, but once they did, he was a quick learner. After one year at this small school, Todd was transferred to Mitchell Road Elementary, a low-performing school of 660 students.

During his first day on the job, a veteran staff member asked him if he listened to teachers. Todd looked her straight in the eye and informed her as only a true Southern gentleman who has learned to listen can, "Yes ma'am, I do. You don't get to be in charge of a school this size at the age of twenty-nine and *not* listen to teachers."

A major difference between highly effective principals and their less effective colleagues is that successful administrators learn early in their careers that the ability to listen isn't just a nice thing to do: It is an essential skill to surviving and thriving in the principalship.

Brenda Valentine, principal of Kanawha City Elementary School in Charleston, West Virginia, admits that one of the things she had to work on at the beginning of her career was listening. She says, "I was young when I became a principal, and one of my first challenges was dealing with parents who had what I call 'tunnel vision.' I discovered that caring parents tend to be more focused on their children's individual needs and

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less concerned about general school policy and procedures. Sometimes, their expectations seemed unrealistic. At first I was defensive, but I've learned that no matter how far off on a tangent parents may go, if I listen, clarify, and make a genuine effort to solve their problems, they will leave my office feeling that it wasn't a waste of their time to see me." Brenda knows that being a Communicator doesn't mean giving people exactly what they want. "I can't make everybody happy. I do try to make sure that they have been heard, and if warranted, I implement a change."

As a beginning principal, Mark Kern of New Palestine Elementary School, in Indiana, often heard the words that a teacher or parent was saying to him but sent a completely different message with his body language. He has learned that listening is the key skill that is needed for "centering on people."

"When I am with someone, I need to give that individual my complete attention. If I am not able to give that kind of attention at that particular

"The best kind of listening comes not from technique but from being genuinely interested in what really matters to the other person. Listening is much more than patiently hearing people out."

—Farson (1996, p. 62)

time, I'm honest with the person. 'I'm sorry, but right now I can't give you the attention you deserve. Can we set up another time to talk?' I try to be sensitive to the other person's needs. For example, if it's an emergency or an extremely urgent matter for them, I do drop what I am doing and give my full attention to them. I try to use good listening techniques, making sure I'm giving them eye contact and not using distracting body language, and making sure I summarize or ask questions to fully understand what they are saying. It's difficult for any of the people in your school—students, teachers, or parents, or other staff members—to trust you completely if they feel you don't listen to them."

1.3 Communicators Empathize

Communicators know how to lay aside their own personal needs to be heard and understood and are able to focus instead on hearing and understanding what parents or teachers or students have to say. Even if they have never had identical experiences, they can suspend belief for a moment and imagine themselves in someone else's shoes.

How would they feel? How would they act? Where would they go for help? They use their imaginations. Suppose their child was being evaluated for mental retardation. Would they be calm, trusting, and totally relaxed? Probably not. Suppose their child was being bullied on the

playground and they thought no one cared. Would they take it lying down? Walking in someone else's moccasins enables Communicators to understand and respond with caring hearts. Communicators know how to engage their imaginations and allow their empathy to flow.

1.4 Communicators Disclose Themselves to Others

Self-disclosure is a technique by which Communicator principals demonstrate authenticity, genuineness, and humanness to others. The purpose of self-disclosure is to share a personal experience in order to show others that they are not alone, thus creating a stronger communication connection. However, too much talking about oneself can interfere with the ability to listen and to focus on the other person's problems.

Terry Beasley, principal of Fairhope Elementary School in Alabama encourages students and teachers to persevere through tough learning challenges by sharing his personal childhood difficulties with learning to read. Contributor Exemplar Lola Malone, principal of Tyson Elementary School in Arkansas, inspires her students to try harder in the face of discouragement and to be patient with those who need more time to learn by sharing the story of her failing grade in college Spanish.

"Managers think the people with whom they work want them to exhibit consistency, assertiveness, and self-control—and they do, of course. But occasionally, they also want just the opposite. They want a moment with us when we are genuinely ourselves without façade or pretense or defensiveness, when we are revealed as human beings, when we are vulnerable."

—Farson (1996, p. 39)

1.5 Communicators Get the Whole Story

Communicators are sensitive to the kinds of responses and attitudes that principals can display that can distress and anger parents, like automatically backing teachers against parents and students without really hearing the issue from the parents' or students' perspectives. Dawn Hurns, principal of Palm Springs North Elementary School in Hialeah, Florida, realized that sometimes she was making decisions without complete information and then would have to change her mind after "filling in the blanks." Now she uses the phrase "Let me think about it" more often and asks "Why?" and "Can you give me more details on that?" She says, "I have become more discriminating about the information that is brought to me. I don't readily accept everything at face value and do more research."

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1.6 Communicators Ask the Right Questions

Certainly the most obvious and direct way to gather information or encourage individuals to explore a particular issue in depth is to ask them a series of questions. The problem with questions, as natural as they may seem in the course of a conversation, is that they often put another individual in a subordinate position in which the principal is the interrogator and expert problem solver: “Tell me what the situation is and I will fix it.” For that reason, Communicators only use questions in extended conversations when they are unable get individuals to reveal information in other ways. One notable exception to the rule of avoiding questions unless they are open-ended in nature, is when it is important to gather very specific information in a potentially threatening or dangerous situation. Another exception would be the kind of informal and sometimes almost rhetorical questions that one asks in brief encounters and interactions in more public places.

1.7 Communicators Say What They Mean and Mean What They Say

Margaret Garcia-Dugan is straightforward, direct, and uncomplicated. She is definitely a Horton Award winner, named after one of my favorite Dr. Seuss characters, Horton the elephant. Horton repeats over and over, “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant” (Seuss, 1940, p. 16). Margaret says what she means and she means what she says. Furthermore, she is consistent and doesn’t keep changing the rules—another “no-no” for those who aspire to be effective communicators.

“When I communicated my expectations to teachers and students,” she explains, “I tried to be as clear and simple as I could be. I repeated my expectations every chance I got. The more frequently they heard what my expectations were and the more they saw how closely my actions aligned to what I said, the clearer they became as to what their actions and attitudes needed to be.”

1.8 Communicators Can Accept Criticism

What is your first reaction when someone winds up and throws you a highly critical curve ball? If you are honest, you must admit that criticism is tough to take. When we’ve worked hard, done our best (or so we thought), and have had good intentions, we want full credit for an assignment well done. We are generally not eager to be critiqued by someone with less experience or fewer degrees.

Highly effective principals, on the other hand, are able to handle criticism (from both staff members and parents) with aplomb. They never engage in arguments, raise their voices, respond in kind with inflammatory remarks, or take a defensive posture. In fact, they often look back on a difficult situation with satisfaction as they reflect on how their ability to listen and learn, as difficult as it seemed at the time, changed their lives.

Activator Exemplar Todd White remembers the first time he encouraged his faculty to tell him what he needed to do to be more effective. He says, "I had to hold my assistant principal down because she kept wanting to argue with the teachers and defend me. But I knew it was important for me to hear what they had to say and learn from it."

Communicators know when to agree with the critic, when to make a conciliatory statement, when to share their own personal feelings in a moment of self-disclosure, *and* when to acknowledge the criticism and move ahead to the next item on the agenda (Parkhurst, 1988, p. 103).

1.9 Communicators Can Give Correction

In her book of essays titled *High Tide in Tucson*, Barbara Kingsolver (1995) tells of her Kentucky grandfather, who dispensed words of wisdom from his front-porch rocking chair. My favorite quote, and one I often share with principals during workshops on how to deal with angry parents, is: "If you never stepped on anybody's toes, you never been for a walk" (p. 45). It's impossible to be a highly effective principal without stepping on a few toes every now and then. You can't make everybody happy and say positive things all of the time. However, successful principals know that there's a big difference between stomping and stepping.

Zig Ziglar (1986), the popular motivational speaker, uses the term "goodfinding" to describe a mindset of giving compliments and positive feedback to others. He says, "I'm convinced that with commitment and persistence you can find *something* good about any person, performance, or situation" (p. 53). Even this superpositive motivator does concede, however, that there are moments that call for correction and instruction.

In her book, *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott (2002) suggests a simple but effective six-step process to use when confronting someone about inappropriate behavior or unacceptable performance: (1) Name the issue, (2) select a specific example that illustrates the behavior or situation you want to change, (3) describe your emotions about this issue, (4) clarify what is at stake, (5) identify your contribution to this problem, (6) indicate your wish to resolve the issue, and (7) invite the other person to respond to what you have said (pp. 149–153). Once you have written a simple

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statement for each of the six steps, verbalizing the six statements should take no more than sixty seconds.

Here's what one Communicator said in her sixty-second opening statement to a teacher with whom she had a problem:

Issue:	Sue, I want to talk with you about the effect your rudeness to parents is having on your overall credibility as a teacher.
Example:	Yesterday, outside your classroom, you confronted Mrs. Teller in a very hostile tone of voice about the fact that John forgot his homework again. You were overheard by several students and parents.
Emotions:	I am very distressed and embarrassed about this issue and how it reflects on our school.
Clarification:	You have a great reputation as a teacher here, and if the gossip mill gets going, I'm afraid you'll damage it.
Contribution:	I should have talked to you the minute I realized that you were having a problem, but I ignored the situation hoping it would go away. I'm sorry. I didn't help you the way I should have.
Desire to Resolve:	I want to resolve this issue today. I'd like to know when we leave my office today that we won't ever have to discuss this kind of problem again.
Response:	Sue, I want to understand what is happening from your perspective. Talk to me about what's going on here.

At this point, the highly effective principal sits back and stops talking. The rest is up to the teacher (or student or parent). Scott's six-step process is practical proof of Kotter's (1996) description of good communication: "[It] seems to work best when it is so direct and so simple that it has a sort of elegance" (p. 89).

1.10 Communicators Communicate Creatively

Don't wait for parents to call you—reach out and make a connection today. Michelle Gayle periodically opens the school directory and randomly selects several parents to call. "Hello, this is Michelle Gayle," she begins. "I am so proud to serve as the principal of your child's school. I'd like to take two minutes of your time if I could."

Michelle laughs as she reports the usual response to her opening comments: "You're who?" She explains once more who she is and then

asks, “What are we doing at Griffin Middle School that you’d like to see continued? What would you like to see us do that we’re not doing?”

Michelle takes careful notes and follows up the phone calls with notes or postcards. “Thanks for the time you took with me,” she writes. “I will pass on your feedback to the faculty and staff.”

Now it’s time to communicate the good news to her faculty. “Let me tell you what the parents are saying about you,” she says at the next faculty meeting. Then she tells them ten things that parents love about Griffin Middle School. “They love the way you communicate with them. They appreciate knowing when their child is having a problem in class. They think it’s fabulous when you work with a student during your planning period to catch them up when they’ve been in the hospital. They love the assignment notebooks you’re using.”

IT’S BEEN TOLD AND TOLD

**Terry Beasley, Elementary,
Fairhope, Alabama**

Gossip is
The art of passing
Information on,
That does not need
To be repeated
And needs be left
Alone.
Yes, it’s been told
And told and told
And now my turn
has come,
To choose abortion
For this tale
Or pass it on and on.

1.11 Communicators Disagree Agreeably

Highly effective principals know that only in their dreams will everyone agree with all of their decisions. But they have learned how to disagree in agreeable ways. Mark Kern believes that his most valuable communication tool is his ability to do just that.

“After I’ve carefully listened to an individual, if the idea that is proposed is one with which I cannot agree for very sound reasons, I tell the individual that I cannot agree with their position or grant their request and give them my reasons. I’m always courteous and respectful of their needs and viewpoint. While everyone’s first choice is to gain my total support or agreement for what they are proposing, most individuals are satisfied that I gave them a fair hearing and made my decision taking into account what they had to say.”

1.12 Communicators Pay Attention to Parents

Communicators aren’t pushovers, and they never permit themselves to be backed into corners, steamrolled, or threatened by overly aggressive and hostile parents. They follow some simple rules to protect themselves as well as their staff members. They take careful notes, keep superiors informed,

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and consult with mental health and law enforcement professionals. They are well informed about school board policies, the legal rights of parents and students, as well as their own rights and responsibilities. They frequently invite others to attend meetings with hostile parents to help defuse explosive situations, and they know the law with regard to their obligations to report possible child abuse.

Communicators also know, however, that there are some very real and legitimate reasons for parents to be angry, and they are able to listen, apologize, and take action if it is needed. Communicators recognize the importance of paying attention to parental concerns in a timely way. Circling the wagons to protect incompetent staff members or stonewalling in the hope that a problem will disappear usually only makes an unfortunate situation more explosive. Kosmoski and Pollock (2000) suggest the following guidelines:

- “Consider all complaints or accusations as serious and valid until proven otherwise” (p. 30). (Most parents find lodging a complaint against an individual teacher or against a school policy to be a stressful and difficult situation. They do not do it lightly and need to be treated with respect.)
- “Promptly rectify any valid misunderstanding or complaint of which you have accurate and direct knowledge” (p. 30). (Unfortunately, ignoring a problem won’t make it disappear.)
- “Do not equate staff support with blind blanket protection” (p. 30).
- “Do not feel threatened when an individual lodges a complaint or voices an accusation. By coming to you, it implies that the person respects and trusts you” (p. 30).

1.13 Communicators Connect Emotionally and Professionally With Staff

Communicators know that it is essential to have interactions and conversations with staff members that are both personal *and* professional. Steve Wilson, principal of Centura Elementary School in Cairo, Nebraska, says, “I touch base with each of my faculty and staff members as often as I can. I want to know what is happening with these people both at school and at home so that I can help them be the best they can be every day. It is important to me that teachers understand that I care about them personally, their classroom performance or their performance in another staff

“I am known for keeping my word. I have been told numerous times that people feel comfortable confiding in me because they know that I will keep their confidences.”

—Principal Dawn Hurns

function, and where they need to improve. This collegiality helps build trust and professional respect, and helps me to raise the bar for high expectations of personal performance in a nonthreatening way. This also helps build the foundation for a learning-centered environment.”

1.14 Communicators Communicate With Students

Communicator Principals know how to communicate with their students. Elementary principals know that it’s important to be concrete when they want their students to remember an important concept or idea. When Facilitator Exemplar Doug Pierson talks to his students at Hamilton Elementary School in Rhode Island about the importance of apologizing to someone they’ve wronged, he gives them more than just words to help them remember his four-step process for apologizing.

“I teach them one step for each of the four fingers on their right hand. The pointer finger stands for addressing the person by name. The middle finger stands for looking the person in the eye. The ring finger stands for telling the person exactly what it is that you’re sorry about. And the pinky stands for being sincere.”

Doug knows that his system is working when he sees a student standing in front of a wronged classmate with his hand behind his back holding up one finger at a time.

Larry Pollock, principal of Juanita Elementary School, in Kirkland, Washington, uses a thumbs-up signal to communicate the work ethic that prevails at Juanita School. One thumb up means “Try your best.” A second thumb up stands for “Don’t give up.”

“What amazes me,” says Pollock, “is the profound impact that a little object lesson like this can have on young minds. A parent recently told me that she and her first-grade son were working a challenging puzzle together. When she suggested putting it away because it was too difficult, her child responded with my “thumbs-up” lesson. ‘Oh no,’ the child said, ‘Mr. Pollock says “Try your best and don’t give up.’”

Lest you think that object lessons and acronyms are only for little kids, think again. Character Builder Exemplar Tom Paulsen, of Naperville Central High School in Illinois, uses

“There are three principles in man’s [and woman’s] being and life, the principle of thought, the principle of speech and the principle of action. The origin of all conflict between me and my fellow-men is that I do not say what I mean, and that I do not do what I say. For this confuses and poisons, again and again and in increasing measure, the situation between myself and the other man, and I, in my internal disintegration, am no longer able to master it but contrary to all my illusions, have become its slave.

—Buber (1948/1958,
p. 158)

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the acronym RESPECT as the basis for his annual graduation speech. It is a character-building program at the high school and stands for responsibility, equality, sincerity, pride, empathy, communication, and trust. Communicators never miss an opportunity to communicate in positive and productive ways with their students.

1.15 Communicators Can Talk to the Boss

One of my former principal colleagues and I often discussed her seeming inability to communicate with our boss, the superintendent. “You always get what you want,” she complained. I couldn’t argue with her. She was right. “Even if I ask for the very same thing that you do, he says ‘no’ to me and ‘yes’ to you. He must like you better than he likes me.”

I disagreed with her. “I think your problem is the way you’re communicating with him,” I said.

“Oh, so I’ve got to polish up my tongue so it’s silver like yours?”

Actually, there was nothing wrong with her tongue at all. It’s just that our boss was a Reader, not a Listener (Drucker, 1999), and she was a Talker, not a Writer. She presented her proposals and requests verbally, completely unaware that our boss didn’t learn well by listening. I, on the other hand, being a Reader myself, just naturally put anything I wanted to discuss with him in writing, always giving him a copy beforehand.

He needed to see and digest the printed word before he could render a positive decision. Confronted with a barrage of words, he often just said no, feeling confused and frustrated.

Peter Drucker (1999) points out, “Very few people even know that there are Readers and there are Listeners, and that very few people are both. Even fewer know which of the two they themselves are” (p. 169). Communicators quickly figure out the most effective ways to communicate with their superintendents or supervisors. My colleague tried the “printed word” approach and left the superintendent’s office with exactly what she came for.

1.16 Communicators Connect in Productive, Helping, and Healing Ways

Highly effective principals know how to help staff, students, and parents explore problems, confront difficult issues, and consider possible solutions. They use three communication strategy tool kits as needed (Kottler & McEwan, 1999; McEwan, 1998).

Successful principals always open their *responsive strategy tool kit* first when talking with parents, students, and teachers about problems: (1) decelerate, (2) attend, (3) listen, (4) open the mind, and (5) empathize. Once they have listened and fully understand the issues, they turn to the

tools in their *exploratory tool kit*. This set of tools is useful for gaining more information from an individual than has been initially shared and includes (1) questioning, (2) reflecting content, (3) reflecting feelings, (4) self-disclosure, and (5) summarizing.

The final *tool kit of action strategies* is opened only after the responsive and exploratory tools have been well used: (1) problem solving, (2) goal setting, and (3) reality therapy. *Problem solving* and *goal setting* are familiar terms, but *reality therapy* as I define the term may be new to you—helping students, parents, and teachers to confront their problems realistically and objectively by means of telling the truth in love. This process is rarely accomplished in one meeting or encounter and takes patience and discretion. It is an ongoing process, sometimes taking place over several years but often resulting in changed teachers, parents, and students.

1.17 Communicators Care Enough to Send the Very Best

In this age of E-mail communication and instant messaging, the art of sending cards and notes is vanishing. There is something quite uplifting, however, about receiving a handwritten thank-you note or word of encouragement. Nancy Moga, principal of the Callaghan Elementary School in Covington, Virginia, often recognizes and encourages members of her school community in writing. In fact, during one school year, she sent 144 notes and messages to a teacher who needed extra support. Most Communicators can't measure up to Nancy's record, but they do know the importance of personal, handwritten communiqués.

Facilitator Exemplar Doug Pierson was overspending his budget on "store-bought" cards and is now buying attractive computer paper to make his own. "I send cards to parents and teachers all the time: thank-you notes, tough-times cards, and birthday greetings." As if that weren't enough, twice a year (summertime and Christmastime), Doug also writes to all of his teachers from home.

"If we genuinely respect our colleagues and our employees, those feelings will be communicated without the need for artifice or technique. And they will be reciprocated."

—Farson (1996, p. 37)

1.18 Communicators Know How to Schmooze

One of my fellow Corwin authors, Robert Ramsey (2002), has written a very helpful book on communication: *How to Say the Right Thing Every Time: Communicating Well With Students, Staff, Parents, and the Public*.

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I particularly enjoyed the section he titled, Smooth Schmoozing: How to Make Small Talk. He says that “schmoozing is a dance and if possible, you want to lead” (p. 127). He recommends sticking to such safe conversational topics as traffic, weather, arts, sports, news, and the family.

WHERE DREAMS LIVE . . . AND DIE

**Terry Beasley, Elementary,
Fairhope, Alabama**

Words are important after
all—
Beginning and ending
conflict,
Inspiring and discouraging
thought.
Creating the
magnificent
And the unwanted—
And should not be spoken
lightly;
And are not easily taken back.
As the bit guides the way of
the horse,
And the rudder the path of
the ship,
Words rule the affairs of
men
Bringing to each
generation
A taste of heaven and a taste
of hell.

I’ve always been a fairly effective schmoozer, but I have only recently learned the power of schmoozing about sports. Having been a sports illiterate for most of life, only my marriage to a die-hard sports fan has motivated me to read *Sports Illustrated* and keep up with various sports teams around the country. Now I can schmooze with the coaches and former coaches who attend my workshops. After a few minutes of discussing the latest ups and downs of their local teams, we have “bonded,” so to speak. They are far more inclined to listen to what I have to say when the workshop begins, if I can make a communication connection over football or basketball.

Good principals never underestimate the importance of small talk. As Ramsey (2002) notes, “Obviously making small talk at social events, at the market, or on the street corner is not the most important thing you do as a school administrator. But it isn’t chopped liver either” (p. 130).

1.19 Communicators Write, Speak, and Teach

Communicators are adept at writing, speaking, and teaching. No one does it with more enthusiasm and expertise than Terry Beasley. He writes poetry (notice his poems in the sidebars) which has been published by both the Alabama and American Poetry Societies; presents at meetings and conventions like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics; teaches graduate classes and serves as a senior thesis advisor at the University of Mobile; writes and reviews curriculum in reading and mathematics; and somehow also manages to teach Sunday School, serve as a worship moderator, and narrate religious dramas.

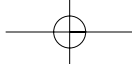
SUMMING IT UP

Communicator principals engage in a nonstop merry-go-round of conversations, interactions, communications, connections, exchanges, and contacts with people. Some may last only a few moments and be quickly forgotten; others are ongoing and life changing. Effective principals handle them all with skill, courtesy, and savoir faire. They are able to connect with sullen seventh graders as smoothly as with suave bankers. They can communicate with senior citizens as readily as they can with the senior class. They can sit down with distraught parents and put them at ease as comfortably as they can take the podium in front of an auditorium full of

Figure 1.1 Communicator Benchmarks

Trait Number 1: The highly effective principal is a Communicator—a genuine and open human being with the capacity to listen, empathize, interact, and connect with individual students, parents, and teachers in productive, helping, and healing ways, as well as the ability to teach, present, and motivate people in larger group settings.

- 1.1 Communicators attend.
- 1.2 Communicators listen.
- 1.3 Communicators empathize.
- 1.4 Communicators disclose themselves to others.
- 1.5 Communicators get the whole story.
- 1.6 Communicators ask the right questions.
- 1.7 Communicators say what they mean and mean what they say.
- 1.8 Communicators can accept criticism.
- 1.9 Communicators can give correction.
- 1.10 Communicators communicate creatively.
- 1.11 Communicators can disagree agreeably.
- 1.12 Communicators always pay attention to parents.
- 1.13 Communicators connect emotionally and professionally with staff.
- 1.14 Communicators communicate with students.
- 1.15 Communicators can talk to the boss.
- 1.16 Communicators connect in productive, helping, and healing ways.
- 1.17 Communicators care enough to send the very best.
- 1.18 Communicators know how to schmooze.
- 1.19 Communicators write, speak, and teach.



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hormonally charged middle school students and keep them mesmerized. Communicators know the power of words as well the value of silence. They understand this timeless truth: “Communication is a people-process. And effective communication is simply good ‘people relations.’ It’s not a matter of technique or gimmicks; it is a matter of sensitivity and understanding and responsiveness” (Diekman, 1979, p. 13).

