

# Improving Superintendent-Business Manager Communication

By Matthew J. Malinowski, MPA, RSBA



**E**ffective school business managers regularly assess themselves to ensure that they are “on top of their game” in the many facets of their jobs. One area they should not lose sight of, especially in the current economic situation, is their ability to communicate with their colleagues in the district.

They may feel overwhelmed by the number of constituents with whom they must communicate: staff, students, administrators, school board members, and, of course, those outside their organization. But effective communication with these stakeholders is vital so that everyone receives the information they need to ensure that each student has an opportunity to learn.

As important as these interactions are, the most critical are those the business manager has with the superintendent. Effective communication between school business managers and superintendents can be a key to ensuring that the district has the necessary resources and support to create a high-performing learning environment. Establishing and nurturing a positive dialogue is not difficult.

## **Build the Relationship**

First and foremost, it’s important to create a school business manager–superintendent relationship that is built on trust, honesty, respect, and cooperation. That relationship becomes the foundation for the communication that follows.

## Establish a Communications Plan

The school business manager and superintendent should devise a general communications plan that outlines the methods of communication preferred for each type of situation.

## Business managers should clearly express what they need to convey.

For example, the business manager and the superintendent may agree that if the issue is urgent and requires immediate action, they will connect via cell phone if they can't meet face to face.

Complicated issues that are not easily summarized in a few sentences or that involve review of "backup" materials may require a face-to-face meeting to resolve. An email or fax may provide the background for an issue they will discuss in person or via phone later.

It may be easier to phone the superintendent than to contact him or her by email, but is a phone call really necessary? If the message is simple and straightforward and time is not critical, an email is sufficient. Thus, neither the business manager's time nor the superintendent's time is tied up. And when the business manager does call the superintendent, he or she knows it's likely an urgent matter.

## Understand the Other Person's Job

Education has its share of technical terminology, as does the field of finance. To communicate effectively and make the best possible decisions, school business managers and superintendents should understand the other's field.

The superintendent might attend meetings regarding purchasing requirements or food services. The business manager might attend meetings regarding new curriculum initiatives. Neither should be reluctant to ask questions if he or she doesn't understand a term, concept, or initiative.

## Be Brief and Clear

In his book *How to Say the Right Thing Every Time*, Robert Ramsey notes that one of biggest communication mistakes is communication overload. Business managers should clearly express what they need to convey and should state honestly how they feel about the topic. Too much information is as bad as too little.

## Listen

If the business manager shows respect by listening to the superintendent, the superintendent will reciprocate.

## When All Is Said . . .

The importance of the relationship between the superintendent and school business manager cannot be under-

## COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT

Even with honest, respectful communication, conflicts can arise. The following are some strategies for coping with less-than-friendly situations.

### 1. Always separate the people from the problem.

A good negotiation should involve a desire to maintain the relationship. This is especially true for coworkers. But the relationship should not influence the substance of the conflict. If it is strictly a relationship problem, deal with it as such.

### 2. Focus on the interests, not the positions.

Do not get caught up in the position taken by the superintendent. Rather, consider the reason the superintendent took that position. Are you missing or unaware of something? Acknowledge the superintendent's position, ask probing questions, and see if there is a way to compromise or to generate alternative solutions.

**3. Generate a variety of possibilities before deciding what to do.** Look for ways in which you will both benefit (win-win). Don't assume that there is only one answer.

### 4. Base final decisions on an objective standard.

When negotiating, think about market value, legalities, ethical and moral standards, equitability, professional standards, efficiency, sustainability, and reciprocity.

stated, and both should do all they can to ensure that their relationship is productive. They should serve each other as sounding boards, devil's advocates, and voices of reason. Most of all, they should be collaborators.

Here are some quick closing points:

- Motivate and challenge each other, thus providing power and energy for the tasks ahead.
- Don't exaggerate the magnitude of the issues.
- Apprise each other of potential problems.
- Be flexible.
- Support each other.

In today's economic and political climate, school districts appear to be in a constant state of change. Effective communication between the school business manager and superintendent is vital to ensure a high-performing academic and financial environment.

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