

# Communications: A Two-Way Street

By Gail M. Zeman



**I**f a tree falls in the woods and there's no one to hear it, does it make a sound? If you're a school business administrator, the answer is no. If you speak, write, or otherwise communicate with an audience that doesn't hear, read, or understand, it's as if you didn't communicate at all. Worse, members of the audience might take away a message that you never intended.

Using the classic questions who, what, why, when, where, and how, administrators can test a communication to ensure that its "bones" are good and that the message will likely be accurately received.

## Who = Know Your Audience

One of the most important rules in communication is to know your audience and ensure that your message is one they are equipped to comprehend. As is the case in the classroom, you must teach to the learner's style. Your audiences range from your immediate staff to the public,

so you must fashion your message to match your listeners' or readers' knowledge base.

For example, your school board should have a basic understanding of your mission and accurate financial and operation information. That doesn't mean, however, that board members need to know every detail—especially during a public meeting. School boards should not be expected to wade through column after column of numbers to determine an overall position.

On the other hand, your staff must have all the necessary information to do their jobs well, including detailed data, time frames, foreseeable complications, and expected outcomes. Details are important for this group, as is the opportunity to return to you for clarification and support when needed.

## What = Send a Clear Message

When you begin to write a report or plan a presentation, prepare an outline so you can clarify for yourself exactly

what message you want to deliver. Start with a topic sentence, list content points, and summarize with a closing statement. You'll add, delete, amend, and embellish from there.

For example, when you're preparing a financial report for a group of administrators in your district, you know they're primarily interested in their own school or department, but you may want to give them an overall picture of the district's balance sheet before getting into details. Start with the overview and end by pulling individual issues back together to a conclusion.

You may also be aware of an unspoken agenda they bring to the table. Address that agenda as best you can to avoid confusion and the shuttle of inform-question-answer-reply that can derail a message's main point.

### Why = Determine Your Purpose

Are you trying to inform, update, persuade, summarize, or explain information to your audience? For example, one of your schools suffers a boiler failure. You'll probably use all these purposes of communication in the course of solving the problem.

First, you'll need to inform students and parents of a school closing. This may be accomplished through a combination of public media messages and phone chains. While you're dealing with the emergency repairs, you'll need to keep your superintendent, school board, and building staff updated on what's happening. You may be in a position to persuade your board to invest in a new boiler and thus must provide them with sufficient information to make a decision on how to fund it.

Finally, you'll have to summarize the problem, how it was resolved, and how it affected the school and the overall district's financial operation. You'll likely use every communications medium at your disposal.

### When = Watch Your Timing

Timing is key. What is the likelihood of passing an operating budget override immediately after the April 15 federal income tax deadline, when taxpayers are achingly aware of how much tax they've just paid? The same is true of the annual publication of the salaries of the top 25 or 50 municipal and school employees—would you choose that moment to announce a fee increase? For major finance announcements issues, carefully calculate the context in which your message will be heard.

Sometimes you won't have the option of choosing the timing of a statement. But as the business administrator, don't answer until you get the facts; then answer quickly, clearly, and confidently. Ensure that your superintendent, school board, and other stakeholders have the information they need as soon as you have it.

### Where = Use the Best Medium

Sadly, most residents know little about the intricacies of public education and are likely to rely on snippets of

information from their children, neighbors, or friends. Yes, people read the papers (a diminishing source of information in this cyber-age) and watch or listen to broadcast news. But those sources are often less powerful than individual contacts. Therefore, you want your public messages to go as directly as possible to the parents and citizens.

Make good use of your school's Website and email systems to reach educators, students, and parents. Be available to members of the business community and other municipal personnel. And be creative in getting correct and informative "sound bites" out to the public.

When you make a presentation, your audience may better comprehend the numbers you share if you present them visually. When conveying financial information, business administrators should rely on a combination of media:

- A written document that includes tables
- An oral presentation that includes handouts with charts or PowerPoint graphics and
- The support of invested audience members who can provide examples and details.

If a member of the press is present, it's certainly worthwhile to speak with that individual personally to summarize your most important points and offer to answer follow-up questions.

### How = Using the Tools

As a school business official, you fill many roles:

- Accounting expert
- Construction specialist
- Nutritionist and retail food service operator
- Public speaker
- Public relations specialist
- Employee
- Employer

If you've got the numbers down pat, the bus routes in place, school lunch prices covering food service costs, all buildings up to code and operating efficiently, and every classroom fully equipped with teachers, materials, and supplies, you still have to tell everyone about these accomplishments. Otherwise, your office is invisible.

Knowing and using the tools of communication effectively, will help you keep yourself and your district credible, respected, and responsive to the ever-changing environment that is public education.

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