

School Leader Relationships: The Need for Explicit Training on Rapport, Trust, and Communication

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ABSTRACT: An important aspect of school leadership is relationship development, but developing meaningful relationships as a school leader is challenging. School leader relationships are challenged by diverse stakeholder groups, varied contexts, and difficult situations. The complex nature of school leader relationships necessitates explicit training for leaders on relational skills. The purpose of this paper is to provide professional development recommendations for school leaders regarding three aspects of relationships: rapport, trust, and communication. Specific ideas for school leaders regarding how to establish rapport, trust, and effective communication are discussed. Finally, the use of structured role play is discussed as the recommended approach to professional development for school leader relationships.

Keywords: school leadership, relationships, rapport, trust, communication, role play, professional development

Relationships are the cornerstone of many aspects of educational leadership. According to Northouse (2015), every situation involving school leaders requires some degree of relational behavior. Current topics in education—such as trust, collaboration, professional learning communities, distributed leadership, supervision, mentoring, coaching, and family-school-community partnerships—reflect the relational nature of the school leader position. Furthermore, the increased involvement of parents and community members in educational processes requires school leaders to develop stronger relationships than ever before (Stronge, Richard, & Catano, 2008).

The importance of relationships in the work of school leaders is further communicated through professional standards. Nearly all of the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (formerly known as ISLCC Standards) developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015)

address the role of relationships in the work of school leaders. Some of the domains focus explicitly on the relational nature of the school leader role. For example, Standard 7 addresses the role of school leaders in establishing a “professional community for teachers and staff” and calls leaders to “empower and entrust teachers,” establish “trust and open communication,” and “develop and support open, productive, caring, and trusting working relationships among leaders, faculty, and staff” (NPBEA, 2015, p. 15). Similarly, Standard 8 addresses the role of school leaders in establishing “meaningful engagement of families and community” and calls leaders to “create and sustain positive, collaborative, and productive relationships with families and the community for the benefit of students,” “engage in regular and open two-way communication with families and the community about the school, students, needs, problems, and accomplishments,” and “build and sustain productive partnerships with public and private sectors to promote school improvement and student learning” (p. 16). Many of the other Professional Standards for Educational Leaders speak implicitly to the importance of relationship cultivation. For example, Standard 2 relates to the domain “ethics and professional norms” and calls leaders to “lead with interpersonal and communication skill” (p. 10), while Standard 10 relates to the domain “school improvement” and calls effective leaders to connect “to the district office and external partners for support in planning, implementation, monitoring, feedback, and evaluation” (p. 18). Though relationship development in the school leader position is acknowledged in both the literature (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Gallagher, Bagin, & Moore, 2005; Riehl, 2012; Stronge et al., 2008) and professional standards for educational leaders (NPBEA, 2015), developing these relationships remains challenging.

Challenges in Relationship Development

School leaders are called to develop meaningful relationships with diverse stakeholder groups repre-

senting varied interests, positions, cultures, needs, values, and beliefs about education (Abaya & Normore, 2010; Henry & Woody, 2013). These stakeholder groups include teachers, students, parents, community members, board members, administrators, and others. The purpose of each of these relationships also varies, as does the school leader's role within the relationships (Odhiambo & Hii, 2012). Adding to the complexity of relationship development for school leaders are the within-group differences that exist. For example, establishing relationships with one family may require school leaders to exhibit a completely different skill set than those required to work with another family. The contexts in which these relationships exist also vary dramatically (e.g., rural, urban, suburban, large school, small school, etc.), and these various contexts present unique challenges for school leaders (Auerbach, 2012).

Relational efforts of school leaders are further complicated by many structural and psychological barriers (Christenson, 2004). Structural barriers are the factors that limit access between educators and other stakeholders, such as time constraints and lack of funding for outreach initiatives. Psychological barriers are the interpersonal factors experienced by educators, families, and community members that impede relationship development. Examples of psychological barriers include distrust, low self-efficacy, fear of conflict, and a blaming attitude (Christenson, 2004).

Principals must rely on a breadth of highly sophisticated relational skills and understand when and how to use these skills to develop meaningful relationships with diverse stakeholders. Unfortunately, principal preparation in this regard is often incomplete (Anast-May, Buckner, & Geer, 2011; Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011), and many school leaders are unprepared to effectively build relationships with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds (Epstein, 2011). Leadership preparation programs often stress the importance of relationships for principals, but they stop short of training principals on how to cultivate meaningful relationships with diverse groups of people (Kowalski, 2001). Failure to provide principals with explicit and extensive training on relationship development is problematic and may leave many school leaders involved in highly complex social interactions with diverse groups of people without the skills and experiences necessary to navigate these situations.

Professional Development Needs

The value of school leader relationships, as well as the highly complex nature of these relationships, suggests the need for explicit and extensive professional

development for school leaders on the establishment of relationships with diverse stakeholders. According to a survey of Wyoming school principals, the areas in which principals needed the most support were related to relationship-building, communication, and conflict-resolution, yet these were the areas in which minimal to no professional development was provided (Duncan et al., 2011). As effective school leaders are called to "develop workplace conditions for teachers and other professional staff that promote effective professional development" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 14) and "tend to their own learning and effectiveness through reflection, study, and improvement" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 15), school leaders must take the charge in seeking and implementing professional development on successful relationship-building.

The sections below contain ideas and recommendations related to professional development for school leaders on relational skills. They are based largely on practices currently taught, implemented, and researched within other fields, such as counseling, medicine, and communications (see Gurland & Grolnick, 2008; Heintzman, Leathers, Parrott, & Cairns, 1993; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010). Though the practices were originally intended to facilitate relationships in other fields, it is believed that they apply more generally to the development of all relationships. As such, these practices can assist school leaders in the development of relationships with various stakeholders.

The provided recommendations center on three important aspects of relationships: rapport, trust, and communication. Though these qualities are presented individually, they should be considered concurrently, as rapport, trust, and communication are inextricably connected and interdependent. Building rapport requires trust and effective communication, effective communication requires rapport and trust, and trust requires effective communication and rapport. Specific ideas and recommendations regarding how to establish rapport, trust, and communication within the field of school leadership are provided below and are followed by a recommendation related to the delivery of professional development in these areas.

Building Rapport

Relationship development starts with building rapport (Ivey et al., 2010). Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) summarized the literature in this area and identified eight categories of rapport: disclosure, honesty, and respect; supporting and monitoring; recognizing the individual; sharing, mirroring, mimicking, and matching; interacting socially; availability, accessibility, and responsiveness; caring and

bonding; and communicating effectively. The authors also provided fifty attributes of rapport from within these domains. Examples of rapport attributes include admitting faults and mistakes, listening and paying attention, creating a positive environment, engaging in personal discussions, smiling, using humor, being accessible and responsive, showing concern, and ensuring that communication is comfortable. In addition, supervisor use of the nonverbal behaviors of smiling, touching (e.g., touching on the arm, handshakes, etc.), nodding affirmatively, posturing to show involvement, and maintaining eye contact have been found to increase rapport with subordinates (Heintzman et al., 2013).

The rapport indicators presented in the literature can be directly applied to the work of school leaders. School leaders can demonstrate both professional and personal care for stakeholders by attending to their personal stories. Finding opportunities to relate with these stories deepens connections and communicates genuine care and concern. Asking about others' interests or spending a few moments to check on their well-being requires minimal effort, but it goes a long way in the establishment of rapport. Respecting the autonomy and individual perspectives of others may also improve rapport (Gurland & Grolnick, 2008). This can be demonstrated by providing opportunities for stakeholders' voices to be heard and allowing them to share in decision-making processes.

Further, school leaders can develop rapport by increasing their visibility and accessibility. Visibility refers to school leaders' presence both within the school and the community. Visibility provides opportunities for school leaders to be seen, but it also provides school leaders opportunities to initiate dialogue with stakeholders. Opportunities to engage in dialogue equate to opportunities to build rapport. Accessibility can also strengthen rapport. School leaders demonstrate that they are accessible to stakeholders when they encourage open communication and provide opportunities for this open communication to occur. It may be beneficial for school leaders to create both formal and informal systems of accessibility. Formal systems could include town hall meetings or public forums, whereas informal systems could involve dissemination of contact information, timely responses to phone calls or emails, and approachability at school events.

Another way for school leaders to establish rapport is through appropriate follow-up on reported concerns and past conversations. For example, a parent may call to discuss a concern regarding his or her

child's academic performance. After discussing the concern and deciding on a plan of action, it may be helpful for the school leader to follow-up with the parent. If the concern has already been addressed, then the parent knows that the school leader heard the concern and cared enough to respond. If the concern has not been addressed, then the principal has created another opportunity to problem-solve on the issue. Either way, the principal demonstrates genuine care and concern for the parent and student—ultimately building rapport and strengthening the relationship.

Establishing Trust

Research demonstrates the importance of trust in relationship development at the school leadership level (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Tschannen-Moran (2004) defines trust as "one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent" (p. 17). Key considerations in the development of trusting relationships include respect, competence, personal regard for others, integrity, vulnerability, honesty, openness, and reliability (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Trust is ultimately dependent on the interplay between all of these factors. Understanding how to cultivate and demonstrate these qualities as school leaders is important in the development of trusting relationships.

Many of the qualities identified above also relate to the development of rapport. However, the distinction between rapport and trust can be found in vulnerability. Vulnerability is the byproduct of relational power dynamics and interdependence (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Recognizing vulnerability and making a concerted effort to relieve the anxiety and discomfort associated with vulnerability "can create a very intense, meaningful social bond among the parties" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 20). In essence, attending to the vulnerabilities of others can foster trust. School leaders can address unequal power dynamics, thus attending to the vulnerabilities of others, by inviting stakeholders to share in decision-making processes. In doing so, school leaders are "willing to make themselves vulnerable by sharing authority and the consequences for joint actions that are taken" (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 27). Again, school leaders can create both formal and informal systems to involve stakeholders in decisions. An example of a formal system is the development of a committee that is representative of diverse stakeholder groups (such as teachers, parents, administration, community leaders, and community members) which provides guidance and input related to school initiatives and programs. Informal systems

could include phone calls to elicit parents' input regarding strategies that might assist their struggling students.

Engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes also provides an opportunity to develop shared expectations. According to Bryk and Schenider (2002), "individuals typically withdraw their trust when expectations are not met, leading to a weakening of relationships and, in more extreme instances, a possible severing of ties" (p. 21). It can be difficult for school leaders to meet the expectations of others when the expectations are unknown or are inconsistent with the expectations of the school leader. Conversely, it can be difficult for stakeholders to meet school expectations when the expectations are unclear or inconsistent with their own expectations. It is important for school leaders to invest time in understanding the expectations of others, as well as communicating their own expectations. These conversations provide opportunities to arrive at shared expectations, facilitate shared decision-making, and ultimately, foster trust.

Effective Communication

Communication, in its many forms (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, face-to-face, written text, etc.), is involved in every aspect of school leader relationships. Understanding how to effectively communicate with diverse stakeholders is imperative for successful relationship development. The following section provides specific recommendations related to the development of various communication skills, including attending behavior, active listening, and questioning.

Attending Behavior

Listening is a key factor in developing a trusting relationship (Ivey et al., 2010), and it is communicated through the appropriate use of attending behavior. Attending behaviors are the verbal and nonverbal responses to speakers that demonstrate attention and listening. There are four aspects of attending that school leaders can use to demonstrate listening: eye contact, vocal qualities, verbal tracking, and body language (Ivey et al., 2010).

The first way to communicate listening is through direct eye contact. Eye contact communicates to others that they are attended to and heard. Though maintaining appropriate eye contact may seem obvious, in the fast-paced, demanding work of school leaders, it is a practice that is easily overlooked. Often, there is not enough time in the day to accomplish everything on the school leader's list, so many school leaders become adept at multi-tasking. Unfortunately,

good-intentioned multitasking can become problematic when communicating with others, as it may send the message that the leader is unconcerned with or too busy to address the speaker. Thus, when communicating with others, school leaders must make deliberate efforts to stop performing other activities, establish and maintain eye contact with the individual, and fully attend to the speaker's message.

Second, school leaders should focus on the vocal qualities of their own speech--specifically their vocal tone and speech rate. Often, it is not *what* is said, but *how* it is said that can create problems with communication and ultimately damage relationships. For example, there are many ways to communicate the simple phrase "keep trying." In some cases, "keep trying" might be communicated in such a way to encourage, foster persistence, and exhibit optimism; whereas, "keep trying" could also be communicated in such a way to suggest failure, disappointment, or frustration. Though the words are the same, the tone in which the words are communicated can drastically change the message. Thus, it is important that school leaders use a tone and speech rate that is consistent with their intended message.

Verbal tracking is another attending behavior that communicates listening. Verbal tracking keeps the subject of the conversation focused on the speaker's message. The example below illustrates how abruptly changing topics can thwart communication and potentially damage relationships.

Teacher: I don't know what to do about Kyle. He won't listen. He won't turn in homework. He won't work in class. He's becoming a major problem in my classroom.

School leader: Hmm. Did you get that message I sent about the faculty meeting tomorrow?

Failing to respond to the teacher's concern likely communicated that the school leader was uninterested in hearing the teacher's perspective or was preoccupied with issues of self-interest. Failure to acknowledge a speaker's message can cause the speaker to feel ignored and insignificant and ultimately damage the relationship.

Finally, school leaders can communicate listening through the appropriate use of body language. Turning the body away from the speaker or displaying a "flat" face can communicate to the speaker that the school leader is bored and uninterested in continuing the conversation, damaging rapport. School leaders should face the speaker squarely, lean toward the

speaker slightly, exhibit an expressive face, and use encouraging gestures when communicating with others (Ivey et al., 2010).

It is important that school leaders develop effective attending behaviors, but it is also important that they become skilled at interpreting the attending behaviors of others. Eye contact, vocal tone, and body language can reveal a great deal about the speaker's perception of the relationship (Ivey et al., 2010), which can ultimately help school leaders target individuals in which concerted relationship-development efforts may be warranted.

Active Listening: Encouraging, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing

Failure to listen can lead to feelings of emptiness, disappointment, and anger from others; thus, active listening skills--the aspects of communication that help others feel heard and understood--are important in relationship development (Ivey et al., 2010). Active listening skills are the verbal and nonverbal responses in a person's dialogue that support open communication, perspective-taking, and relationship development. Specifically, active listening involves the use of encouraging, paraphrasing, and summarizing to "enter [the] person's world as he or she sees it" (Ivey et al., 2010, p. 157).

Encouraging refers to short verbal or nonverbal responses that prompt others to share and elaborate on their perspectives (Ivey et al., 2010). Encouragers can include subtle verbal sounds, such as "uh-huh" or "hmm," nonverbal gestures such as head-nodding, or brief restatements of the speaker's words. The example below illustrates the use of encouragers by a school leader.

Student: I hate math! It's too hard. No matter how hard I try, I still don't get it. I'm sick of it!

School leader: Uh-huh.

Student: I really do try, but I just can't do it. I get so frustrated because everyone else in the class seems to understand.

School leader: You're frustrated.

Paraphrasing involves repeating the content or affect of another's message. Paraphrasing is typically stated in a tone that communicates a desire to clarify and understand the speaker's message and involves four dimensions: a sentence stem, key words used by the speaker, the essence of the speaker's message, and a check for accuracy (Ivey et al., 2010). When practicing

the paraphrasing skill, it is helpful to consider "what the speaker's basic thinking and feeling message is" (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012, p. 72). The example below illustrates how paraphrasing could be used by a school leader communicating with a teacher.

Teacher: I try to communicate with parents, but it can be really challenging. I send home notes. I email. I call when needed. I always encourage parents to talk to me when they have concerns, but I never hear from them. Then when there is a problem, they go straight over my head and come to you. That's so frustrating! I want to work with them, but how am I supposed to know what their issues are if they won't talk to me? Instead, they come straight to you and complain about all the things I'm doing wrong. That's the first I hear about their concerns--when they talk to you. I think they end up feeling like they've won because you listen to them and respond to their concerns. And then I'm the bad guy, and I'm the one who needs to change, even though I'm the one who tried to encourage open communication in the first place.

School leader: You're frustrated because you feel like you make effort to communicate with parents, but your efforts are often unsuccessful in reaching parents. You're also frustrated because you want to feel supported by me. Instead, you feel like parents think that I am taking their side. Do I understand you correctly?

Summarizing is similar to paraphrasing, but it incorporates the speaker's message and affect over an extended conversation or multiple conversations and can help clarify complex messages communicated by the speaker (Ivey et al., 2010; Symeou et al., 2012). In summarizing, school leaders should focus on significant concepts and themes communicated over the course of the correspondence, review these significant concepts and themes with the speaker, and conclude with a check for accuracy. The example below illustrates how a school leader might use the skill of summarizing to conclude an annual evaluation meeting with an assistant principal.

School leader: You identified many areas in which you excelled this year. You've taken the charge on many aspects of PLC implementation in the building. Specifically, you've helped teachers understand how to make the most of their PLC time, and you've helped them incorporate data into their PLC discussions. You've also done a great job of managing student discipline issues and creating a school-wide system for understanding classroom versus office-managed behaviors. In large part because of these efforts, office

discipline referrals have declined nearly 40% from last year. Over the course of the year, we've also discussed areas in which you would like to continue to improve. One area you consider a weakness is communicating tough messages. You experienced multiple situations this past year with teachers, students, and parents in which you had to deliver unwelcomed news. You found these situations particularly challenging and believe that you did not do an effective job of managing these conversations. In the future, you would like to receive additional professional development on effective communication and delivery of tough messages. Does this sum up your perspective related to your performance this year?

When used effectively, active listening skills allow others to feel heard and understood--thus building rapport and establishing trust; but when used inappropriately, active listening responses can be problematic. Keys to the effective use of active listening responses are timing and balance. When active listening responses are overused, they can annoy or frustrate the speaker. When they are underused, the speaker can feel ignored or insignificant. Cultural differences that may impact verbal and nonverbal communication should also be considered when using active listening skills. Responses used at the right time, with appropriate frequency and consideration for cultural differences, support the flow of communication and demonstrate attentive listening (Ivey et al., 2010).

Questioning

The appropriate use of open-ended questions is also an important aspect of effective communication. Well-stated, open-ended questions can encourage ongoing dialogue and provide an opportunity to clarify the speaker's message; yet if carelessly stated, questioning can seem interrogative and evoke feelings of defensiveness. Appropriate tone and word choice can ensure that questions communicate the intended message. Symeou et al. (2012) recommend "open-ended questions which are nonthreatening and encourage description, namely, questions that require more than a simple yes or no answer, which start with 'how,' 'tell me about,' or 'what?'" (p. 72).

Structured Role Plays

Repeated practice of relational skills is necessary to automatize their use, as "understanding does not automatically indicate ability to perform" (Ivey et al., 2010, p. 203). Thus, it is recommended that school leaders engage in repeated rehearsal of rapport, trust, and communication practices, and the use of structured role plays can facilitate this training. Scenarios

used in structured role plays are carefully and intentionally crafted to evoke specific skill development--in this case, relational skills. Many school leader role play scenarios exist, such as a school leader hosting a community meeting to improve school-community relations, a school leader calling a parent to discuss student discipline issues, or a school board member calling a school leader to discuss complaints of a teacher. Brief scenarios, such as these, provide a starting point for impromptu conversations that can challenge school leader relationships and ultimately strengthen relationship-building capacity.

The primary benefits of structured role plays are opportunities for skill development in a safe and supportive environment and opportunities for immediate and detailed feedback regarding the use of practiced skills. An additional benefit of structured role plays is that school leaders can observe and critique their own skills through the use of video recordings. To maximize the effectiveness of the role play experience, it is recommended that the role play is supervised, at least initially, by an individual specifically trained and skilled in relationship development (e.g., counselors). The role of the supervisor is to provide immediate feedback to the school leader on the use of communication skills and the development of trust and rapport. It is also recommended that the role play scenarios are carefully crafted to represent the unique, contextual needs of the school leader. In other words, the role play scenarios would be most useful if they represent issues or concerns occurring specifically within the school leader's professional context.

Reflection is also an important component of structured role play. Reflection provides an opportunity to assess practiced skills and to consider areas of continued growth and development. Reflection can occur concurrently with the feedback session, or it can occur while watching the video recording of the structured role play. Reflective questions that could guide the school leader in the development of relational skills might include "How did my nonverbal communication impact the flow of communication?," "Did I spend time establishing rapport?," "What words did I emphasize?," "What was the tone of the message--did I speak calmly, gently, sternly, curtly, etc.?", "Did I ask open-ended questions which encouraged open expression and continued dialogue?," and "In what ways did I attend to the speaker's message?."

Conclusion

Today's school leaders are challenged to work in complex environments with diverse stakeholder groups and amidst unprecedented scrutiny (Stronge

et al., 2008). The development of healthy, meaningful relationships with all stakeholder groups is instrumental in helping school leaders successfully manage the complex contexts in which today's schools exist. Unfortunately, many school leaders are currently ill-equipped to develop these types of relationships (Anast-May et al., 2011; Duncan et al., 2011; Epstein, 2011). Thus, additional training in relationship development is needed. Specifically, training is needed that assists school leaders in building rapport, establishing trust, and communicating effectively with diverse stakeholders. The use of structured role plays could provide school leaders with the training experiences necessary to develop competency in these areas.

Implications for Researchers and Practitioners

Research is needed in the area of school leader relationships. Specifically, research is needed that examines the impact of relational training on the work of school leaders. Research is also needed that provides and examines a more detailed framework of professional development. Symeou et al. (2012) conducted a study of teacher training related to teacher-parent communication in Cyprus and found that teacher participants believed the training assisted in the development of communication skills with parents. This study provides a starting point for program development; however, professional development for school leaders should also consider other important relational components, such as rapport and trust, and it should focus on building relationships with multiple, diverse stakeholders.

The recommendations and practices discussed above are not intended to oversimplify or downplay the complex realities of school leader relationships. No set of behaviors can guarantee quality relationships with everyone, but practices related to building rapport, establishing trust, and communicating effectively could improve relational efforts. It is through professional development in the areas of rapport, trust, and communication, with multiple opportunities to practice learned skills, that school leaders could develop the skills necessary to navigate the complex relational terrain that surrounds their positions.

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