As a superintendent for 32 years, I have learned that there are many ingredients for success, but one stands out above the rest — great communication skills. You can have the most innovative reform plan around, but if you are not effective in communicating about the plan, it will fail. I have seen good superintendents who do not put a priority on communication forced from their jobs … it happens because communication has not been made a priority, and is often approached only as an add-on or after thought.

Dr. Jerry Weast, long-term superintendent with the Montgomery County Public Schools (MD) in Why Communication Matters

To Be Successful, Try These 10 Personal PR Tips

1. Remember That It Is All Personal; You Can Never Not Lead
   As your community’s top school official, you do live in a glass house. What you say and what you do is watched, recorded, repeated, and becomes fodder for the grapevine. You are seen as a role model in your community and you must become a role model for communication. It is your job to set the tone and the style of two-way communication in your system. Be known as a leading communicator who expects all staff members to communicate effectively as an everyday requirement of their job. That’s how you will begin growing a communication culture in your schools.

2. Take the Wheel and Keep the Course on Your District’s Vision
   In our work in school districts like yours throughout the U.S. and Canada, we often see a gap between the realities of the posted vision and what employees do every day. Goals and objectives must come to life so that staff members better understand where your system is headed and the progress you are making toward that destination. Keep your goals visible by visiting with staff at all levels and telling others about your visits. Some superintendents blog about these visits and others actually make short video clips and post them for all staff to review.

3. Relations are like investments: The more you put in, the greater your return.
   Get to know your community’s movers and shakers on a face-to-face basis. Establish a public opinion leader network or key communicator program and use technology to make it work after you have your initial face-to-face meetings with these leaders. Do not just jump to a social media option; the first-face-to-face meeting is critical in establishing a relationship. And then turn up the volume on the social media and technical ways of reaching key members of your community — especially in a two-way fashion.

4. Focus Your Communication Effort on Teaching, Learning, and Achievement
   Critics of communication efforts by school districts often note that the PR effort only exists to make the superintendent and Board look good. Make sure your efforts focus on the elements that add to better communication among parents, teachers, and principals. The second wave must focus on building...
community support to help build the resources that teachers and principals need to improve student achievement. If you make your PR effort about you, the focus — both good and bad — will be on you. Shift the focus to your goals and your staff and student accomplishments.

5. **Spend Your Time Lifting People Up, Not Putting People Down.**

You have a natural role to be your system’s chief cheerleader. Keep the great work of staff visible; let staff know that “you have their backs.”


Sure, there are other ways of leading your schools, but they often will cut your tenure short. Being open and transparent is a must. In today’s world with instant communication by just about everyone, the “word” will get out rapidly. So if something happens, you will be accused of hiding information from the public. And you need to give the engagement process more than a “lip-service” approach. The loudest criticism we often hear in communication audits is that the school district gives the impression of listening but doesn’t “close the communication loop” when parents and residents are engaged. Many parents and others tell us that the district has already made up its mind, but will still hold “counterfeit” hearings — just for window dressing.

7. **If you believe your comments are always being taken out of context, maybe you are failing to provide one.**

It is easy to become irritated when you are misquoted because the damage has been done and nobody will see the reprint or it will be buried somewhere. So it is important to heed the advice of NSPRA colleague Bill Henry listed above. You must work a bit harder to explain and document your points. And do realize that adding a personal story to the message you are attempting to convey is the best way to make your message stick.

8. **Communication is a contact sport**

As superintendent, you will have to make opportunities to mix it up a bit with community leaders and others by meeting face-to-face with them on community school issues. Failing to engage often leads to more criticisms, increased rumors, and proactive communication by critics of your system. When you don’t communicate, you create a vacuum. And your critics always fill that vacuum, once again forcing you into the catch-up mode.

9. **Being Visible in a Crisis**

If you want to be successful, you must be visible in a crisis! When crises hit, you must display your condolences to all the appropriate people and set the recovery plan in place. Often people want to know who is in charge so the recovery can move forward, and it is your role to take the lead in these difficult situations. Just think of any recent major crisis, and the ramifications of doubt that set in when the CEO wasn’t available to lead staff in the recovery.

10. **You know if you have a successful communication plan when everyone in town says our schools instead of the schools**

Legendary PR guru, Pat Jackson, APR, gave us this bit of wisdom years ago. It says a lot about how well you’re doing when your community starts talking about our schools as opposed to the schools. It shows some ownership, which gives an emotional boost to helping make our schools better. It is always important to remember who owns the local school system and what your role is in helping people make your school system one of the best in your area.

Resources like this handout are just the tip of what NSPRA has to offer today’s school leaders. Find out about our resources or membership benefits, our national Seminar, and more by going to our website at www.nspra.org or by contacting us at (301) 519-0496.

Thanks and do remember that we are all in this together.

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