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Communication between administrators and staff

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Communication between administrators and staff

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of communication between administrators and staff. Shortt (1987) suggested that historically there has been a communication gap between school administration and staff. He asserted that effective administrators have many qualities; however, communication skills are the ones that may have the most direct impact on positive school climate. It seems apparent that closing the communication gap between administrator and staff has an impact upon positive school climate.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFF

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Master of Arts in Education

by

Timothy Robert Bell

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The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of communication between administrators and staff. Shortt (1987) suggested that historically there has been a communication gap between school administration and staff. He asserted that effective administrators have many qualities; however, communication skills are the ones that may have the most direct impact on positive school climate. It seems apparent that closing the communication gap between administrator and staff has an impact upon positive school climate.

This paper identifies the importance of administrators improving communication with faculty, those communication approaches which appear to produce improvement, and the impact of such improvement upon school climate.

Importance Of Improving Communication

Administrators today must accept the fact that they may need to take a hard look at the importance of effective communication with their staff if they are to develop an effective school. Certainly many things contribute to an effective school; however, the administrator should first attempt to develop a cooperative atmosphere, which begins with effective communication with the staff.

Shortt (1987) indicated that the opinion held by

others about a school is generally a reflection of a school's administrator. This is supported by Hoy and Henderson (cited in Shortt, 1987) who suggested that the principal is the single most important individual in setting the tone or relationship in a school. However, Evans (1986) contended that, although the school principal is the key individual in determining the effectiveness of a given school, he/she is not the only individual essential in improving effective communication channels. It must be stressed to the staff that effective communication can only exist if both the principal and staff are willing to do what is necessary to keep channels of communication open and clear. Principals and teachers share the goal of providing students with the strongest possible educational program and they share responsibility for communication, as well (NEA/NASSP, 1987).

Today's principal actually spends a great deal of time communicating. Sixty to seventy percent of the principals' daily activities fall under the heading of communicating. For some principals the process is intuitive and for others it is conscious (McEvoy, 1987). However, most principals spend too little time managing staff and students, and communicating with them in the

process, and too much time managing buildings, grounds, paperwork, athletics and other activities. Although these are important, they are not really directly related to teaching and learning (Pinkney, 1987).

Principals often complain that their effectiveness and ability to launch innovative curriculum or major staff development programs are hampered by their daily routine (McEvoy, 1987). If this is the case, it is important that school administrators be able to diagnose the capacity of the staff to help accomplish some of these tasks. By delegating to the staff more responsibility to help accomplish some of the tasks the educational process will be enhanced (Blanchard and Zigarmi, 1987). This clearly requires the principal to communicate effectively with the staff.

In 1987 Iowa authorized a program called Phase Three, which allows for additional state funds to be given to local school districts. Each school district must decide how these funds will be dispersed. The administration and staff will need to decide how these funds will be dispersed collectively. This is another area that again will require effective two-way communication between administration and staff.

The NEA and NASSP (1986) developed a list of

indicators to help in the assessment of communication and school climate. It would be productive for both the administrator and teacher to look at and attempt to follow these indicators since they do provide a good model for schools to assess where they stand in regard to communication and staff involvement.

These indicators include:

1. The principal and teachers create structures to ensure significant staff advice on school policies and operations.
2. The principal seeks teacher advice in developing policies, practices and conditions that create a professional work-place for staff.
3. The principal seeks teacher advice on staffing needs and the selection of new staff.
4. The principal and teachers treat each other with respect and understanding.
5. The principal and teachers support one another in maintaining order and discipline. They recognize that a climate of civility enhances student achievement and staff morale.
6. The principal is visible and available to faculty and students both formally and informally.
7. The principal schedules and conducts well planned faculty meetings. All staff members feel comfortable about communicating openly in these meetings.
8. Teachers participate in faculty meetings and identify topics for discussion.
9. The principal and teachers jointly devise methods for recognizing student achievement.
10. The principal provides opportunities to acknowledge teacher excellence and achievement.
11. The principal communicates concerns regarding individual teachers directly and privately to those teachers. (p. 18-19)

There have been studies which suggest that some of the indicators previously mentioned may need attention. Harrison (1985) implied that teacher participation in decision making is associated strongly with the quality and quantity of communication that is exhibited by their principals. The lack of cooperative decision making is further supported by another study conducted by Instructor (cited by Nathan, 1987) that involved more than eight thousand five hundred teachers. This study revealed that forty-seven percent of the teachers had no opportunity to make important decisions related to inservice training and twenty-six percent said that their principal never provided useful guidance or instruction. The research by White and Reaves (1981), which indicated that principals make suggestions five more times than they ask teachers for ideas, also indicates that communication generally and staff involvement in decision making specifically may need to be improved.

Communication Methods

After the administrator has accepted the importance of establishing effective communication with the staff, he/she must then develop some methods to create effective communication. Successful administrators have recognized the usefulness of several methods which enhance their

ability to communicate with their staff. Certainly each administrator has his/her own personal touch that may be difficult to model; however, these methods may also help the administrator to improve performance on some of the NEA/NASSP indicators of communication and school climate.

To begin with, two-way communication can be improved by letting the teachers know what is going on. There is nothing more frustrating for the staff than not knowing what is going on. Webb (1985) suggested that this can be accomplished by providing frequent bulletins and personal notes to the staff. While this would take a relatively short time to do, principals who have difficulty with staff relations should not develop a habit of sending written notes to staff, but rather should use more face-to-face communication. Such an approach shows to the teacher a more personal touch, which teachers appreciate (DiGeronimo 1986).

Listening is another important key to establishing good two-way communication. Most people are likely to talk with someone who they believe will listen to what they have to say, and teachers are certainly no different. When the administrator listens to suggestions and opinions of the staff, the administrator will often gain information that may help in making important decisions.

The use of a suggestion box, staff meetings, individual discussions between teacher and principal are all methods that the administrator may employ to gain advice and input from the staff. Hands and Pankake (1987) supported the importance of listening, emphasizing that listening is what provides the data needed in order to respond to situations effectively. As mentioned earlier, White and Reavis's (1981) study concerning the frequency with which the principal makes suggestions compared to the teachers supports implicitly the need for administrator improvement in the area of listening.

The principal should also provide the opportunity for faculty to participate in identifying the purposes, priorities and goals of the school before they are finalized (Sanderlin 1982). This can be accomplished through committees, quality circles, task forces, staff meetings, retreats, peer observations, professional meetings and staff social interaction, all of which are essentially only vehicles which facilitate both direct communication and listening. The staff should develop a feeling of ownership as a result of such involvement (Rothberg, 1986).

The National Education Association and the National Association of Secondary School Principals

jointly agree that the challenge of improving our schools requires re-thinking and revising the traditional teacher-principal relationship. Jointly these two organizations developed Ventures In Good Schooling, which is a blueprint for a cooperative school in which teachers and principals share authority with the purpose of helping teachers and principals develop their own staff relationships. This publication provides suggestions and ideas that have been identified with effective relationships (NEA/NASSP, 1986). It seems apparent that substantial credibility can be given to Ventures In Good Schooling because it was established by both teachers and administrators (NEA/NASSP, 1987).

The Result Of Effective Communication:

Positive School Climate

After the administrator accepts the importance of effective communication and develops methods to improve it, the end result should be a more positive school climate. Administrators should be able to recognize the crucial value of communication in both human relations and school climate.

The type of organizational climate developed by the leader will determine the success or failure

of any organization, including schools. Pinkney (1987) suggested through his research that the support, loyalty and commitment by the staff contributes largely to the success of the students. Students will reflect the organizational climate of the school. Miller (1981) claimed that how teachers feel about themselves and the instructional environment will have an impact on any educational program, and agreed that there is evidence that the climate of the school and the morale of the staff can have a positive effect on public attitude and good learning.

Holfield (1981) made an interesting observation that good morale is not just a matter of people being happy. Rather it is a situation in which people feel they are serving a worthy purpose, making a significant contribution and are recognized and appreciated. Buonamici (1983) supported Holfield when he stated "that positive morale leads to improved work attitudes, stronger loyalties, lower absenteeism, fewer complaints, greater efforts, less wasted time, more meaningful activities and a cooperative environment" (p. 9).

Another important area of school climate involves

trust. The administrator and teacher must trust one another. Ellis (1988) concluded that in one study after another, a good school climate, however defined, is correlated with teachers' perceptions that they can trust their principal. The foundation for such trust obviously begins in the area of communication. If communication is not developed, trust has no basis for its development.

To develop an atmosphere conducive to high morale and positive climate, administrators should establish two-way communication and good human relations, recognize good teaching and the abilities of the teacher, and be democratic in defining goals and curriculum. (Briggs, 1986).

Summary

It is essential for administrators to look at the methods they use in communicating with their staff. Teachers and principals are partners in the school improvement process. The NEA/NASSP (1986) jointly stressed that the mutual responsibilities and common obligations of principals and teachers demand a concerted effort to forward the quest for educational excellence.

The most successful secondary schools are those in which teachers and principals collaborate in deciding

school policies or issues ranging from school reform to staff development and school budgets. This can only take place with effective two-way communication (Phi Delta Kappa, 1986).

The principalship of public schools, especially senior high schools, may be the most challenging job in America today. There is no way that the principal can deal with new challenges such as child abuse, drugs, family break-ups, political corruption and crime and disrespect for authority without help and support from the staff (St. John, 1983) and communication is the ingredient in generating much support.

Many teachers treat their students the way principals treat them. Teachers should not be asked to treat students as individuals if the principal does not treat teachers as individuals (Blanchard and Zigarmi, 1987). If a significant number of teachers blithely ignore memoranda, stuff obscentities into the suggestion box, jokingly or sulkily dismiss staff meetings as a waste of time, an honest and careful review of the administrator's communication procedures may be in order (Sanderlin, 1982).

Now is the time that administrators must be prepared in the skills of communication, because it is likely

that effective communication with staff may be as essential as any ingredient in creating an effective school setting.

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