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## Subtle communication skills necessary to be an effective principal

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## Subtle communication skills necessary to be an effective principal

### Abstract

After researching the characteristics or qualities of an effective principal, there seemed to be two recurring themes. One component, the Vision or "Cultural Content" of the principal, included the principal's expectations, goals, values, and direction for the school. The second component addressed the "Symbols" which are used to communicate the principal's vision. Symbols used can be either formal (direct) or informal (subtle). Emphasis will be placed on the subtle communication symbols used by a principal in order to achieve an effective and/or healthy school.

SUBTLE COMMUNICATION SKILLS NECESSARY  
TO BE AN EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL

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by  
Cathleen Anne Molumby

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After researching the characteristics or qualities of an effective principal, there seemed to be two recurring themes. One component, the Vision or "Cultural Content" of the principal, included the principal's expectations, goals, values, and direction for the school. The second component addressed the "Symbols" which are used to communicate the principal's vision. Symbols used can be either formal (direct) or informal (subtle). Emphasis will be placed on the subtle communication symbols used by a principal in order to achieve an effective and/or healthy school.

There seemed to be a consensus among the authorities that the use of good human relations skills by the principal promoted a positive school climate, the public relations program, and, therefore, good communication. In 1966, a Cooperative Research Project (No. 1076) was developed by William C. Schutz. Schutz attempted to establish procedures for identifying persons with potential for public school administrative positions. However, many of the questions asked in his research were very personal in nature. Areas of questioning included family status, family size, relationships between the individual family members (e.g. father-son, father-daughter, etc.). Consequently, this method is not applicable to a school district's

selection process for prospective principals. As a result of surveying established administrators, however, some recurring patterns were revealed. Among Schutz's conclusions it appeared that training in technical knowledge (i.e., school law, finance, organization, etc.) was essential, yet its mastery seemed to have little or no relation to administrative success. Essential to the training process was theory in community and organization relations and decision making, and the key to success seemed to be in the area of human relations. (Schutz, 1966) Schutz included a scientific or mathematical process for the analysis of an administrative candidate. Rather than reducing human characteristics to numbers and statistics as Schutz proposed, human relations qualities will be addressed directly.

Firestone and Wilson (1984) referred to three aspects with which a principal must work--the first called "Cultural Content"; the second, "Symbols"; and the third, "Communication." The third area of communication (as Firestone and Wilson described it) seemed to intertwine itself throughout both the content and symbol areas. Therefore, it seemed inappropriate to isolate it into a separate category.

### Cultural Content--Communicating Goals

Many authorities emphasized the importance of a principal's need to know what cultural content is desired. This content could be described as a principal's vision or goals and expectations for a school. Directly related was a school's educational climate. A school takes on the values of its principal. A principal who knows the direction which he or she wishes the school to follow, and can communicate this vision to the staff and community effectively, will be more likely to be viewed as a successful and/or effective principal. Once the school's cultural content or vision has been established, what remains is the challenge of communicating the vision to the staff, students, and community. The approaches used by the school to achieve the desired outcomes will determine the atmosphere, the climate, or the school's culture. This, in turn, influences the teachers' commitment, as well as their willingness to keep working at the school and their emotional ties to it. (Firestone & Wilson, 1984) Therefore, it is essential that the principal have his or her vision defined in order for the school to have direction, in order for teachers (and community) to "buy into" the vision and claim some ownership in it, and in order for school climate to be established.

Hence, the cardinal principle of any leadership effort is to "know what you want to accomplish." (Franklin & Kimbrough, 1979, p. 107) While this would seem to be fundamental, it is far from easy because being in favor of some things often requires not supporting others. (Firestone & Wilson, 1984) As a result, also necessary (not only for success, but for survival) is the need to set priorities. Many times schools are expected to accomplish too many disparate goals, thereby overloading principals (and staff) and leading to accommodations rather than strong commitments. (Wolcott, 1973) Schools (and school principals) that are too divided or "spread too thin" cannot do quality jobs and, in the long run, suffer. Such accommodations can undermine strong cultures. (Firestone & Wilson, 1984) The principal needs to be committed to the vision or goals of the school, and to be able to communicate that vision and share ownership of it with the staff and community. Setting priorities can help the principal to learn to deal with many of the parents and community people who unfairly hold the school responsible for teaching "all the things necessary to exist in this world today." (Ruffin, Jr., 1972, p. 34) School administrators and teachers should not feel that they have to justify or defend their program. Instead, relations between the



school and community should concentrate on informing and presenting the educational program as it exists.

(Marks, Stoops, & King-Stoops, 1985) Research indicated that most parents are content with school authorities making the major decisions related to the school life (as determined in the school's vision or goals). Their main concern was to be kept informed. (Cattermole, 1985) Therefore, the need for a public relations program (both internal and external) was identified as very important.

#### Communication Components

As pointed out, skills in communication are necessary in both the cultural content of effective schools and the symbols used by effective principals. Various communication components were identified, however, which can effect the success a principal may experience as he or she tries to communicate the cultural content.

Learning to deal with parents and community people, as well as students and staff, was revealed as a very important quality of communication. Without going into a detailed description of a public relations program, certain subtle characteristics will be discussed which are important components of the communication process, not only in relationship to the public relations program

but also with regard to the development of the school climate. First, Jerry L. Pulley (1975) described the "classic linear model" of communication as having five components: source, message, medium, receiver, and reaction. Pulley maintained that a breakdown in communications could occur at any of these points. A breakdown could occur as a result of educational jargon in the message, or the medium used in communicating the message could cause problems (e.g., too much use of the "paper memo" rather than the person-to-person transfer of information). Difficulties could result from the receiver's interpretation of the message because of the individual way in which a receiver would want to understand it. The attitude of the receiver needs consideration when one is constructing a message. (Pulley, 1975)

Armistead (1982) explained a two-component process of communication: a sender and a receiver. He maintained that the important component is the receiver. "If the receiver can't understand our message, our efforts have been in vain." (p. 6) Likewise, Feldman (1983) pointed out that the effectiveness of transferring information is affected by characteristics possessed by both the communicator and the person with whom he or she is attempting to communicate. There

seemed to be a consensus. As Means (1986) stated, a skill necessary for anyone wishing to communicate is the ability to convey the values or desired information clearly to all concerned in any setting.

### Perceptions and Perspective-taking

The communication process (through the use of symbols) depends upon perceptions. The principal needs to ensure that the messages of his or her vision are appropriately interpreted or perceived. The perception and the acceptance of the principal's values and/or vision are determined individually by the staff, the students, and the community. Consequently, it is important that the principal also be sure to communicate a consistent set of meanings throughout the school.

(Firestone & Wilson, 1984) To ensure that a consistent set of meanings is perceived by all, an understanding of the communicator-audience is required. Hence, the abilities to "read" people, to be sensitive to individual needs and backgrounds, and to listen are of utmost importance. Bernays (1980) stated that communication relies on a recipient's predisposition to accept what the communicator is trying to convey. An administrator must understand the audience in order to understand its predisposition. Social perspective-taking, or identifying with "where someone

is coming from," is one method which can help a principal understand other people. This characteristic seemed to be essential for becoming more effective in communication. (Johnson & Johnson, 1974) If an administrator can understand and/or be open to the faculty's and the community's attitudes, then more success can be achieved when attempting to communicate. Likewise, if the faculty and community understand where the administrator is "coming from," their attempts at communicating with the administrator will also be more successful. As a result, if the principal's vision is successfully communicated, this will help the community understand the principal and his or her vision.

#### Communicating With Feelings

Reviewing the literature revealed a number of qualities of human relations which likewise indicated characteristics of an effective principal. The principal must be many things to many people. It was revealed that the success or failure of the school program depends largely upon the principal's ability to relate to the community, faculty, and student body. ("The Principal", 1972) A list of social attitudes which are characteristic of an effective principal could fill many pages; therefore, only a few broad categories will be addressed.

Johnson and Johnson (1974) maintained that "no two individuals could communicate or interact without cooperating to form a common language and agreed upon norms for behavior." (p. 218) Consequently, conditions necessary for effective communication, in order to interact, to create a "common language," are warmth, empathy, respect, concreteness or specificity, genuineness, self-disclosure, immediacy, and cooperation. Ideally, these characteristics should be present between the communicator and recipient in order for an honest exchange of ideas to occur and an understanding to follow. Or as Richard Felicetti (1974) described it, "a subtle form of communication...the communication of feeling needs to be done with warmth, interest, and concern." (p. 22) This type of communication cannot be accomplished without personal contact and a commitment to the education of individuals. (Felicetti, 1974) A principal must take the time and effort needed in order to communicate these feelings throughout a school.

Another subtle, yet important, characteristic necessary in order for communication to be effective is trust. Trust is one of the subtle "symbols" which communicates the principal's vision, goals, and expectations. Communication is a two-way process and

trust ensures the open, two-way flow of information. Therefore, as First and Carr (1986) pointed out, there is a need for a "continual adjustment process." (p. 6) Both the communicator and the communicator-audience need to work at understanding. In order for understanding to be achieved, both parties need to build trust, respect, and open-mindedness for each other in order for the messages to be received. The development of trust is subtle (and sometimes a slow process). Yet, trust is a prerequisite for the development of effective communication. Patricia First and David Carr (1986) explain trust:

How does trust grow? It flourishes with time, with contact, with a record of shared mutual experiences, with memories both pleasant and sad, with respect. A principal interested in good communications must make the contacts and build the memories with teachers and other staff members ....

Trust takes time, but it is time well spent. (p. 6)

Building a climate of trust and respect throughout the school and into the community can help to avoid or eliminate many of the barriers to effective communication.

One way to build trust suggested by First and Carr (1986) is to make more time for social exchanges. They

suggested that "perhaps we have strayed too far from the voluntary humanism of sharing the rituals with our workplace 'family.'" (p. 7) The sharing of personal events such as family concerns and feelings appears to be an important behavior in the development of trust. (Rothberg, 1984) If a foundation of trust can develop within and around a school, communication will occur almost instinctively. Rothberg (1984) maintained that motivating individuals to do a better job seems to occur when a climate of trust is developed. Developing that climate can be done with care and time. In the Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training (Pfeiffer & Jones, 1981), ten specific behaviors were listed which could help cultivate a climate of trust. They included: (1) sharing--the sharing of personal events; (2) vulnerability--that is, "to err is human"; (3) loyalty--commitment to consistent goals of the organization and its leaders; (4) accepting others--accepting the unique behavior of others; (5) involving others--using others for input or decision making; (6) valuing--willingness to exchange ideas; (7) awareness--sensitivity to the needs of others; (8) communicating--giving clear communication, both oral and written; (9) openness--willingness to explore new experiences; (10) honesty--avoidance of deceit.

A climate of trust needs to be open and willing to explore new experiences--including other opinions which appear to be different from the principal's vision. Assuring the staff that varying opinions are valued will also promote feelings of self-worth. Trust cannot be established if a positive self-concept (of both the principal and school personnel) is not promoted. Emphasizing the self-worth concept, Rothberg (1984) pointed out, "How can I trust someone else if I can't be comfortable with who I am?" (p. 21) A relationship of trust will help people feel better about what they are doing. It will meet esteem and achievement needs of teachers, thereby resulting in job satisfaction and increased productivity. (Rothberg, 1984) Braukmann (1980) referred to promoting self-concept as "the art of making people feel good about themselves." (p. 1) Braukmann believed this ability to be of paramount importance if children are expected to learn. He emphasized that "nothing, and I mean nothing, has more of an impact on the learning of youngsters than a teacher who loves his job and who loves coming to work each morning. Getting people to feel good about themselves is contagious; so is making them feel badly [sic]." (Braukmann, 1980, p. 2)

Through the establishment of trust, attitudes of



staff and community are formed. Attitude formation relies heavily upon one's own personal experiences and the experiences of other people that one trusts.

(Wherry, 1979) People's beliefs about schooling are based primarily on their own experiences as students, what they know about local schools, and, if they are parents, their children's experiences in those schools. ("Effective School PR," 1982) Thus it is important for a principal to realize that an individual's attitude is formed on direct or indirect personal contacts with the schools and that he or she should therefore try to improve an individual's attitude toward the school by improving the communication and contact (through a positive and honest public relations program).

#### Symbols Used to Communicate

There are various processes or "symbols" communicators can use to transmit ideas. There can be oral, written, visual, and social routes to express information. Messages can also be consciously and/or unconsciously delivered. Trust has already been explained as a subtle symbol for successful communication. Other symbols used in communicating (e.g., in written form or through body language) are left open to interpretation by different individuals. The larger the group of individuals with whom the

communicator wishes to communicate, the more difficult it may be to achieve the desired results. (Snegroff, 1983) It is important to remember, therefore, that the understanding of exchanged information relies on individual interpretation. Or as a quote from the Maxims of Publilius Syrus states, "The important thing about the word is how you understand it." (cited in Means, 1986)

#### Direct Symbols of Communication

Today, we live in an image-oriented culture. Marketing is a key concept. (Armistead, 1982) It is generally agreed that most communication is accomplished primarily by visual and auditory symbols (the formal or concrete symbols). This is done most frequently by words, either spoken or written. (Means, 1986) Television, radio, printed materials, and advertising are areas of communication used by businesses and schools. Depending upon the communicator-audience, the vehicle for communication will vary. Direct, personal contacts with school personnel, however, seem to be the key to effective communication in education. Therefore, the way a school and its principal are perceived is a direct result of the principal's and the school's public relations. (Brock, 1982) Public relations, like communication, can be both direct and subtle.

### Subtle Symbols of Communication

The informal or subtle forms of symbols can be nonverbal or physical, such as flags, trophies, report cards, and even the furnishings and how they are arranged in the classrooms and school office. The power of a symbol comes from the way it combines "school-specific and universal elements." (Firestone & Wilson, 1984, p. 9) Other subtle symbols are perceived in the daily personal contact within the school between administrators, faculty, and students. Verbal and non-verbal communications (body language and social communication) are notably involved. An administrator's or a teacher's actions may communicate much more to a student (or to each other) than any written or verbal communication process. Smiles, sincere listening skills, and visibility within the school communicate positively to any observer. Therefore, visibility, community image, and professional presence of the principal are all subtle symbols that communicate the school's cultural content. (Brock, 1982) Attendance at football games with the principal's family communicates an image of the family man or family woman which contrasts sharply with that of the ogre (an image the principal may fall into more times than he or she would like). It is essential that the principal be perceived

as a concerned and active member of the community, who shares the values of his or her neighbors. (Brock, 1982) Visibility within the school building was likewise identified as a crucial subtle symbol. Neglecting to visit classrooms blocks effective relations with teachers and students. Walter G. Patterson (1977) pointed out that "an available and visible leader provides psychological assurance that the leader 'is there' should problems arise. This ultimately enhances the leader's effectiveness." (p. 104)

Michael Brock (1982) maintained that the subtle, nonverbal aspects of communication (i.e., even the clothing style of the principal) are potentially more effective and powerful than direct and/or formal symbols of communication. If the verbal and the nonverbal are in conflict, it is the latter that is perceived by the public. (Brock, 1982) It is to the principal's advantage, therefore, to learn the power of perceptions and to work at ensuring that they are always, to the extent possible, within his or her control. Having control means "planned." Positive public relations is planned; negative public relations just happens. (Armistead, 1982) Some nonverbal ways by which control can be achieved could be through the allocation of

funds, space, and time, which can symbolize the importance given to instruction and learning. There was agreement among many authorities that the physical appearance of the school, the atmosphere of the school office, leaving the door to one's office open, the way in which the secretaries and receptionists answer the phone, the manner in which discipline is handled, are all within the control of the principal and are all subtle symbols which are perceived by visitors and observers of the school. ("Suggestions for Principals," 1972; Ingari, 1976; Wherry, 1979; Brock, 1982; "Effective School PR", 1982; "Case Studies," 1984)

External communications between a school and the community also serve as subtle symbols which communicate the school's image. The most frequent information about the schools that parents receive comes from children. (Cattermole & Robinson, 1985) Information can be sent home through children by means of written notes or through verbal responses from the child. Children who come home feeling happy or feeling frustrated communicate very different messages about the school to their parents. The written messages that a school sends home (i.e., report cards, teachers' notes) communicate a great deal about the school. The school newsletter communicates not only with the parents, but with other

community people who have no children in the school system. Written forms from the school need to be evaluated to be sure that the image communicated is healthy, as well as effective.

The school must realize the need to communicate in other ways than just the written word or in "preaching"; it must use the skill of listening as well. Some educators may feel threatened if they fail to distinguish between parental concerns and personal criticism. (Calabrese, 1985) Parents, as well as teachers and students, will contact a school, not necessarily to communicate some personal criticism but just because they need a receptive ear. What better way to communicate (which involves listening skills and both verbal and nonverbal communication, such as body language) than in person? It was clear that parents highly value face-to-face interactions as ways of receiving information about their school. (Cattermole & Robinson, 1985) Practicing sincere listening skills and avoiding "negative listening" (Batten, 1976, p. 51) will develop rapport with staff, students, and community. (Felicetti, 1974) When a principal is willing to listen, when he or she is sympathetic to problems, when he or she tries to help teachers secure needed materials, when the time is taken to say "Good morning,"

a principal gives that personal touch which returns in a flow of positive communication.

Parent/teacher conferences, personal visits to the school, and open houses are ideal times to give the parents firsthand information about what is happening at their children's school. Visitation programs and verbal communications are good ways for schools to present sincere, honest exchanges of ideas. Raymond Calabrese (1985) maintained that "communication will lead to many hours of human interaction, which in turn will generate a positive school climate." (p. 110) The successful interaction among students, parents, faculty, and administrators is based on good communication. Good communication was identified as a basis for the operation of effective schools.

#### Conclusion

Fostering a positive school climate and a positive public relations program through social attitudes (e.g., inclusion, openness, cohesiveness, trust, respect, etc.) is an essential and powerful process which promotes effective communication. (Garascia, 1986) The social attitudes that a principal possesses (or "learns" to develop) determine how he or she relates to the community, staff, and student body and, to a large extent, also determine the success or failure of the

school's program (or cultural content or vision). ("The Principal", 1972) Therefore, a general composite of the social attitudes important to a principal's success includes: (1) awareness or alertness--someone who is informed; (2) professionalism--including objectivity, self-control, earning trust and respect, being visible; (3) supportiveness--through interaction with children, teachers, and community, being a teacher and student advocate, funding activities; (4) open-mindedness--being a listener, thoughtful; (5) communication--positive and effective, formal and informal; and most important of all, (6) humanity--have a sense of humor, be sensitive and hospitable. ("The Principal", 1972; Bruakmann, 1980) The principal who is a composite of these traits, who helps develop better personal relations with school personnel, is being an instructional leader. (Franklin & Kimbrough, 1979) Metz compared a principal's effective communications to an impressionist painting made through a myriad of little strokes. When viewed individually and up close, they may seem meaningless; but they form a pattern when seen from afar. (Metz, 1978) A principal is a blend of many skills. In order for the entire picture to come together, the subtle skills in communication are essential.



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