Communicating with Respect

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Ethical leadership requires effective communication, a requisite skill for building trusting and productive relationships with teachers and other stakeholders.

A key dimension of leadership is the centrality of respectful and consistent communication in the school community. Leaders who maintain high standards of personal and public discourse, who choose words with care regardless of the setting, and who refrain from commenting disparagingly about others are seen as trustworthy in the eyes of teachers, students, and parents. In this article, we have adapted two vignettes from our book Healthy Schools: The Hidden Component of Teaching and Learning (2013, Rowman & Littlefield) to demonstrate how language can engender trust and maintain high standards. We believe that ethical leadership rests on the careful and thoughtful choice of words in both oral and written communication and on framing issues of conflict at a high level of abstraction.

Building Teams
In this first vignette, Sebastian, a newly hired middle school teacher, meets with his principal, Jesse.

“So, how is it going, Sebastian?” asked Jesse as Sebastian entered his office at the end of the first week of school.

“I’ve come from a meeting with the other sixth-grade teachers, and I’m not sure we are all on the same wavelength when it comes to expectations for the students and our vision of what middle school is all about,” Sebastian responded.

“Give me more detail,” said Jesse. “What topics have you discussed with the team? Where are the stumbling blocks, as you see them?”

“On the surface, everyone is respectful, but guarded,” Sebastian replied. “I’m not sure where everyone stands.”

“I can hear in your voice that there is another issue at stake here,” said Jesse. “Can you tell me about that?”

“I think it has to do with attitudes toward the students and their behaviors and the approach that the other teachers are taking as they establish classroom expectations,” Sebastian replied. “They seem more focused on direct instruction than on building a classroom community.”
Effective and accurate communication can either make or break any discussion, which is why tone and style make such a difference in outcomes.

"Thank you for coming to talk with me about your observations, Sebastian," said Jesse. "I can see that you want to communicate with your colleagues about your own educational philosophy and goals. Over the weekend, I want you to think about how you can frame your reflections and share them with the team. I'd suggest that rather than open the door to the whole array of issues, you take one and focus on it for the first step. Let's touch base Monday after school once you have had time to reflect."

When Sebastian met with Jesse the following Monday, he said that he had thought through the issue and had come to the conclusion that what he really needed to do was to listen to the veteran teachers and hear why they had made the choices they had. Jesse was pleased to hear such balanced words and wanted Sebastian to feel part of the sixth-grade teachers' team, so he sent a brief memo to the teachers with the team meeting agenda, commenting on the attractive bulletin boards they had created, reminding them that he would be attending their standard Wednesday meeting, and asking for agenda items.

The memo had a positive tone and allowed for teacher input. It asked the veteran teachers to discuss the reasons for the curricular choices that had been made so that Sebastian could learn about the history of the program. In framing the agenda in this way, Jesse focused on connecting Sebastian to the current team of teachers through a discussion of curricular issues, rather than introducing the more personal issue of attitudes toward students.

When he entered the meeting room, Jesse sensed the teachers' hesitation. They explained that they thought that Jesse was questioning what they were doing teaching middle school. They said that they felt pressure from the state-mandated testing. Each teacher spoke her mind and voiced how she felt about testing. Sebastian began to understand why the veteran teachers' expectations were not the same as his. He was grateful to Jesse for offering to listen and discuss the issue in a respectful manner. He also saw that Jesse never criticized the teaching team, but rather provided a forum for open discussion of the challenges that faced them.

This scenario exemplifies how a principal can strengthen trusting relationships in an ethical manner by listening closely to teachers, appreciating their perspectives, and attending to their needs. Communicating with teachers respectfully helps teachers feel trusted and valued. Being an attentive listener is a beneficial trait for educational leaders to have because they must always take others' opinions into consideration and attend to others' spoken messages and their underlying meanings.

To transform the discussion into productive and collaborative discussions to ensure everyone's complete understanding, principals must be innovative in their communicative skills. Effective and accurate communication can either make or break any discussion, which is why tone and style make such a difference in outcomes. Lines of communication between principals and teachers need to be open, honest, clear, and consistent. That means principals should disseminate accurate, timely communication to develop trusting relationships with their teaching staffs (Gimbel, 2003).

**More-Effective Evaluations**

Many principals find that it is challenging to hold true to their ethical standards, build trust, and provide ongoing professional growth. Used constructively, teacher evaluation is an important tool to meet those challenges. Most teachers are concerned about their evaluations, but when teachers trust their principals, evaluations can support experimentation and improvement.

For example, Louann, an eighth-grade science teacher, wanted to try a new, problem-based, hands-on science lesson for her students. Louann modeled the lesson after the television program CSI. Although she had never taught the lesson before, Louann invited her principal, George, to observe the class. During the observation, the digital camera malfunctioned, the fingerprinting ink spilled all over, five students could not remove their surgical gloves because they were too small, and a power surge resulted in a darkened computer screen and no overhead lights. Students were laughing and tripping over one another in the darkened classroom, and the student "victim," who was lying on the floor surrounded by "blood" (i.e., ketchup), was being stepped on by his classmates. Louann finally called it quits. "Sorry, we cannot finish with our experiments today. Maybe we can try this another time. We need to clean up and organize everything now," she said firmly (Gimbel & Leana, 2013).

It took the students all of the 15 remaining minutes to rearrange the desks, clean up the ketchup, put away the materials, and close down the computer. Louann apologized to George and explained that she did not apportion the time and space as well as she had thought.

That night George telephoned Louann to see how she was feeling about the classroom visit. He wanted her to know how much he valued her as a teacher. She was brave and confident enough to invite him to witness a class that she had never taught before. She took a risk and was willing to have it count as an official evaluation.

Louann apologized profusely for all that went wrong in her class that day, but George interrupted.
“Do not apologize,” George said to her. “I am calling to thank you. You are the kind of teacher I appreciate. Thank you for setting a tone of experimentation in our school. I am pleased you felt safe enough to invite me to your ‘experimental’ class. That is what I will write about in your evaluation. And we can discuss how to plan and provision better for future endeavors” (Gimbel & Leana, 2013).

The next day, George found a note from Louann in his school mailbox.

Dear George,

After your phone call last night, I began to think about why I felt comfortable inviting you to my class when I was unsure how things would go. I realized that in your three-year tenure here, you have managed to build a culture of trust, collaboration, high expectations, and professional growth. As teachers, we are not afraid to take risks. Your phone call last night is an example of why we feel your support in our own learning. We know where we stand with you, George, and because of that, we can take risks. Thank you for calling me last night.

Louann (Gimbel & Leana, 2013)

Danielson (2010) suggests that there are two basic purposes to teacher evaluation: to ensure teacher quality and to promote professional development. Although George used the class period as an official observation, those two primary purposes were evident. Louann demonstrated a high-quality lesson marked by its creativity, risk, student involvement, and engagement, and she was able to grow as an educator and learn how to improve a similar lesson next time she chooses to step outside the box. In essence, “using evaluations to strengthen teaching is part of the fabric of the school” (Toch, 2008, p. 34). Every observation and experience while teaching should be a part of strengthening a teacher’s educating skills.

The observation served as a tool, not as a critique of Louann. It was a tool that helped Louann reflect on what went wrong and how she might improve for the next time she tries the CSI theme while focusing more on the intricate details of the lesson. She already knew the big picture and the objective. It simply was not clear how she was going to get there with a science class full of adolescents. In essence, George focused on Louann’s potential as an educator and thus inspired her to see it in herself.

Conclusion

Being a principal is not only about data, academics, and behavior but also about knowing “how to build relationships and support for learning among staff and students” (Sparks, 2013, p. 8). The ability to build trusting relationships with faculty members is essential to being an effective principal. Donaldson, Marnik, Mackenzie, and Ackerman (2009) agree that “relational leadership qualities are a value set rather than a skill set. The most effective principals operate from a value system that places a high priority on people and relationships” (p. 12).

Jesse built trust with his veteran teachers by creating an environment in which the teachers could openly discuss the curricular choices that had been made over time and by introducing Sebastian to the history of the middle school program. George built trust with his teachers through effective communication and encouragement, an example of which could be seen when he called Louann at home to reassure her.

Establishing interpersonal trust with teachers requires that administrators invest in “building and sustaining relationships with teachers through various communicative and supportive behaviors” (Gimbel, 2003, p. 25). Lack of communication—or even misinterpretation—may lead to disengaged faculty members, even mistrust. If Jesse had dismissed Sebastian’s concerns or if George had not called Louann that very evening to applaud her creativity and risk-taking, those principals may have discouraged the teachers’ reflective process, continual learning, and even future innovative behavior. PL

REFERENCES


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