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Preface

When I have presented workshops about principal/teacher communication, participants will make comments such as, “This is such a common sense topic, but it is so important that we hear more about it.” I like to conclude the presentation by singing a song called “Legacy” by Nichole Nordeman that challenges each of us to figure out what legacy we wish to leave behind with each encounter we have with others. Because we do . . . leave a legacy, that is. With every conversation we have with teachers and staff members, instructional leaders leave an impression or a legacy. What will they say after their conversations with us? We have the responsibility to ensure that what is said after each exchange is worthy of the role of instructional leader we were hired to be.

Communicate and Motivate is written primarily for principals and other school district leaders, but would also be quite helpful for teacher leaders such as grade level chairpersons, counselors, and instructional coaches. Educational leadership professors would find it beneficial to assign as additional reading in their coursework. Essentially, the book is designed for anyone who is interested in improving communication skills with teachers. The book is written for people who *want* to get better, not necessarily for people who *need* to get better. Why the distinction? We will only gain something if we have the willingness. We have to have the willingness to grow in order to actually grow.

In speaking with other principals in Okaloosa County, Florida and throughout the country, the resounding theme is one of frustration in communicating with teachers. While most principals have good rapport with most of their teachers, many express frustration with the negativity that resonates from a handful of teachers. Comments such as, “The teachers aren’t willing to grow or change,” “Teachers in my school get so defensive when a parent asks them a simple question,” and, “I am so frustrated after talking with my teachers,” are just a

few, indicating a need for improved communication and relationship building.

Communicate and Motivate contains timeless advice as well as tips from my seventeen years as a teacher and counselor and my six years as a principal. The book also includes anecdotal and motivational real life examples of how to (as well as how not to) communicate with teachers in our schools. After all, if we want to make a change in teachers, what good are our best “instructional leader words of wisdom” if our audience shuts down in the first five minutes because of *how* we said something?

It is time for a more in-depth approach not only to building the relationships with teachers, but also maintaining and keeping those relationships through effective communication techniques.

Outline of Chapter Titles

1. Make Time for Courageous Conversations

It’s time to pull the elephant out from underneath the rug and have tough conversations—about student achievement, classroom discipline, and teacher/parent interactions. These conversations, while rarely easy, deserve a proper time and place in which to address the issues we are bringing to light. Knowing when and where to broach these difficult topics is important to the outcome of the conversation.

2. It’s Not What You Say, But How You Say It

Principals can tell teachers that they need to work on incorporating more technology into their teaching and have them leave either saying, “My principal doesn’t know what she’s talking about. I don’t care what she says anymore,” or, “Wow, my principal has given me some real food for thought today. I need to think carefully about the points she made.” The deciding factor is how we, as instructional leaders, present our constructive criticism to the teacher.

3. What You Say Matters, Too, So Choose Your Words Carefully

What's the difference between saying, "You need to work on . . ." versus, "How can I help you improve in . . ."? We teach the students at our school to "stop and think" before they speak or act. We, as principals, should do the same. If we choose our words carefully instead of spewing out every thought and emotion, our words will more likely be "effective and productive."

4. Seek First to Understand

This is where we get ourselves into the most trouble. We must have the willingness to admit that the way the conversation is going is not working and agree to back up and do a little bit of Stephen Covey's "Seek First to Understand . . ." (Covey, 1989) before we can then be understood. Focusing solely on getting our point or agenda across will ultimately lose the teacher in the process.

5. One-on-One Conversations

We need to make the time for talking about important issues—not just in faculty meetings, but in one-on-one conversations with our teachers. They need to hear that we care about them and what they are doing in the classroom and around the school.

6. Avoid Defensiveness

We can almost see a physical wall go up when we tune people out. When our defenses are raised to this level, we can no longer hear. Specific techniques to lower the wall once it's up are discussed. But better yet, let's talk about how to keep it from ever rising in the first place.

7. Let's Not Call the Whole Thing Off . . . Yet

Is the principal/teacher relationship that is struggling because of our ineffective communication worth saving? If it is, we must have the willingness to be the professional. The book and workshops focus on proactive ways we can aid conversations while remaining professional. At the end of the day, however, we as educational leaders must remain professional even if the other person does not.

8. Improving Parent/Teacher Communication From the Inside-Out

How do we want to see teachers communicate with parents? Motivating and surprising role-playing activities created to model examples and non-examples of good communication can be an experiential asset and are explained in depth.

9. When to Use and Avoid Online Communication

The enormous conveniences as well as some dangers of e-mail are discussed in depth in this chapter. Inherent in this form of communication are necessary precautions. This chapter explores the benefits of sending quick, positive notes to teachers via e-mail, but will also give examples of when e-mail communication should *not* be used or should be avoided at the very least. Other online communication tools are also discussed.

10. The Legacy of Effective Communication

What do teachers and parents say about us after they leave our offices? We want it said of us that we “talk the talk” but that we also “walk the walk.” Beginning each conversation with this in mind will better enable effective communication. Exercises and challenges on leaving a communication legacy behind are discussed in this chapter.

Points to Ponder

Throughout this book you will be presented with “Points to Ponder,” appearing in bubbles at the top or bottom of a page. These “Points” can be used as discussion prompts for students or school leaders in a book study, or reflective pauses for solo readers. However you use the book, these bubbles are meant to give you pause. As the book is intended to help us grow as instructional leaders—and growth requires thought—use these questions and statements to challenge yourself to change and grow in your communication practices.

First Things First—Be Seen as the School Leader

Before I was hired to be the principal at an elementary school in northwest Florida, I was the guidance counselor at the same school for several years. The principal who preceded me gave me some sound advice before he retired. “When you come back from lunch or after you’ve done a few classroom walkthroughs,” he said, “walk back to the office via a different route.” His point was that we need to get out of our routines and make sure we, as the leaders in our school, see everything and are seen everywhere. Leaders need to be visible. “When the cat is away, the mice will play” may sound like a silly analogy. The majority of good teachers don’t need the principal in their classrooms on a daily basis. They are self-starters, motivated instructors, who are going to do good, solid work regardless of who is in the building or in their classroom. But the necessity of having the presence of a principal in a school is most obvious when that leader is absent.

In an effort to cut costs, two local elementary schools were forced to share a principal. The parents, teachers, and students felt the absence. Discipline issues increased, test scores suffered, and faculty morale plummeted. Employees at one school even admitted that they had developed a code that signaled others when the principal was on their campus. The principal was well-trained, great at motivating teachers, and desperately wanted to make the school-sharing a success. However, it soon became obvious that consistent presence is a necessity. Educational leaders are crucial to a school’s well-being in many ways

and the best way we can be a part of the culture is to observe and be observed.

But let's be honest. Raise your hand if you have ever walked down the hallway and made a sharp left or right in a door or out a door when you suddenly saw that teacher who seemed to be the first in line at least once a week to come to your office with a concern or complaint. The point is that we have all experienced the desire to hide from what we need to do, at one time or another. Eleanor Roosevelt (1960) said, "You must do the thing you cannot do" (p. 30). This quote is a challenge to those of us who lead our schools. It is time to face the music of courageous conversations with all the teachers with whom we work at school, whether we want to or not. Rosanne Cash (1993) said, "The key to change is to let go of fear." What are we doing today to let go of the fear that keeps us from changing?

But when and where shall we begin? Perhaps we should first start with when and where we should *not* hold these conversations. Just as we caution teachers to avoid having difficult talks with parents or co-workers in the hallways or in other public areas, we should make the commitment to avoid the same. What is the problem with these particularly public encounters? Not only is the tension likely to be exacerbated for the participants, but the air around the school can quickly become "poisoned" for the audience who unwittingly or purposefully overhears such talk. People feel uncomfortable hearing negative talk. It is, however, like the proverbial train wreck. "I can't bear to see the horrific devastation," we say as we peek through our fingers at the wreckage. But what do we do next? Go share the terrible details with 10 of our closest friends.

Difficult conversations are better off reserved for a private location behind closed doors. Parents and teachers joke that I have an always-open-door policy because I really do hate to shut it for fear that someone might have a concern that goes unasked or unsaid. Do you recall the scene in *Dangerous Minds* when Louanne Johnson, the spunky teacher played by Michelle Pfeiffer, finds out that the principal sent away one of her high school students who was trying to report someone trying to kill him because the student had walked in the office without knocking on the door? The victim ended up being killed that

Point to Ponder Are you accessible? How do you make time for conversations with students? Parents? Faculty?

morning. When the counselor encourages Louanne to talk to her students about what had happened, she asks, “What should I tell them? If they don’t want to die, remember to knock?” School leaders, in my opinion, should be accessible to everyone.

The time the door should get shut, however, is during serious conversations with teachers or parents that don’t need to be witnessed by the rest of the school. The principal’s office should be a safe haven to share concerns, for students, parents, teachers, and the principal alike. Don’t think for an instant that people won’t hear those conversations you try to keep at a whisper level when your door remains open. The front-office/front-lines secretary at our school (let’s just call her the magical, Genie-in-a-bottle, tamer of wild beasts, wonder woman, for lack of a better term) and I have often remarked that if you talk about people, they will appear. I learned this lesson the hard way when new to counseling, and I must admit I still have to be reminded of the same lesson: shut your door if you need to have a private conversation because people do listen and they do hear, especially when we would rather they not. It is simply a life lesson we all must learn and heed, lest we lose credibility with our stakeholders. That reputation takes a good while to be built up, but only a split-second to be knocked down.

Finding Time

Another concern is finding the time to talk. Making the time for courageous conversations may sound like a great endeavor, but it is often a difficult task. A few years ago, I interviewed and subsequently hired a teacher from a neighboring school. While I could tell immediately that she was an excellent teacher, she began a habit of sending me e-mails, asking if she could make appointments with me on a regular basis. When we met

at the designated time, she asked me questions that easily and quickly could have been answered in passing or via e-mail. When I questioned her about this issue, she confided to me that at her previous school, the principal seemed to never have time for her concerns. She had learned that the only way to get face time was to make an appointment. She had an excellent point. We work in a world of rapidly moving days that seem to fly by right in front of our very eyes. How many times do you find yourself looking at the clock only to realize that you have ten minutes until dismissal and you never got a chance to take a break or to even eat lunch? If we are not careful, we will fritter away our days without making the time for teachers—the very people who are most crucial to the success of our schools. As the school year draws to a close, we should not regret the time we spent at school and we won't if the bulk of the time was spent with people. The paperwork is always going to be there and it's probably going to be easier to do when our stakeholders are gone for the day, anyway. Therefore, even when the "frequent flyer award winners" come to our door to justify their reaction to a parent or to rationalize why they didn't turn in their lesson plans the past weekend, we simply must make the time.

Suggestions for how principals can make time:

- ♦ Come before school a half hour early. Have you ever noticed how much work you can get finished when nobody else is around?
- ♦ Stay a bit later to catch up on e-mails, phone calls, etc.
- ♦ Delegate, delegate, delegate.

In other words, make sure your time at school is worthy of what you were hired to do and be, which is the instructional leading of the school. If we can take care of some of the minutia outside of the time when teachers and students are there, our time while they are there can be devoted to better student, staff, and parent interactions.

Sometimes we honestly don't have the time at that moment. When this happens, we owe it to everyone to be upfront. Every year at the beginning of the school year, I make sure to tell parents and teachers one important note: "If you come to see me,"