

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first conversation about this book happened in 2016 when Claudia Wheatley from Solution Tree Press reached out to me by phone. Always on the lookout for new authors, Claudia told me that I had developed a “large digital footprint” with the online content I was sharing with school leaders via my blog and podcast. As we talked about my school culture and how communication strategies had helped shaped its momentum, she suggested the title for a new book on the subject: *Messaging Matters*.

The title struck a chord with me. Four years earlier, I had made a commitment that I wanted to connect with others and grow personally and professionally by sharing at least one blog post every week for five years on lessons I was learning in school leadership. That decision enhanced my communication about my school and about school leadership in ways I had never imagined. The more I highlighted the great lessons and actions of my teachers, students, and team members, the more momentum was built around positive initiatives.

At this point, the bulk of my writing experience had been in the world of blogging, podcasting, and self-publishing so I was thrilled at the idea of a book with Solution Tree Press. I also had no idea how challenging and encouraging it would be to be surrounded by so many eyes, minds, thoughts, suggestions, and corrections along the way. *Messaging Matters* has definitely been a team effort: it could not have happened without the students, teachers, and other education leaders who inspire me every day. It could not have happened without the many reviewers who provided incredible feedback. I have so many people to thank for this project.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Author	vii
Introduction: Why Messaging Matters	1
A Messaging Crisis	3
A New Era of Messaging	5
An Opportunity for Positive Entanglement	6
How This Book Is Organized	7
1 Building a Positive Culture for Messaging	9
Cultivate the Characteristics of Great Leaders.	9
Show Leadership and Positive Engagement.	12
Build a Foundation for Effective Communication	16
Wrap Up	20
2 Cultivating a Positive Message With Teachers	21
Emphasize the Three Cs	22
Develop Key Responsibility Areas.	26
Model the Behavior You Expect From Teachers	29
Provide Helpful Feedback	32
Identify and Encourage Positive Instructional Behaviors	34
Wrap Up	39
3 Using Strategies for Positive Messaging With Teachers	41
Employ Strategies for Positive Messaging.	41
Apply Technology Strategies	45
Practice Strategies for Providing Meaningful Feedback	51
Apply Strategies for Facilitating Change	56
Wrap Up	59
4 Cultivating a Positive Message With Students	61
Ensure a Welcoming Environment	63
Celebrate Student Success	67
Communicate With Students	72
Wrap Up	79

5	Using Technology to Message With Students	81
	Employ Technology Tools.	81
	Release Weekly Student Newsletters	85
	Wrap Up	90
6	Cultivating a Positive Message With Parents and the Community	93
	Make Public Relations a Priority.	94
	Build a Platform for Communicating	98
	Partner With Parents	101
	Wrap Up	105
7	Using Technology to Message With Parents, the Community, and Beyond	107
	Build a Platform With Technology.	108
	Launch a School Email Campaign.	116
	Publicize Celebration	120
	Wrap Up	125
	Epilogue: Messaging Tips	127
	Get Open	127
	Talk to Your Teammates	128
	Offer Assistance	128
	Anticipate	128
	Identify Strengths and Opportunities	129
	Stay in Control	129
	References and Resources	131
	Index	135

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Will earned his bachelor's degree in English education from Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and his master's degree in education leadership from Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

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INTRODUCTION

Why Messaging Matters

The art of communication is the language of leadership.

—James Humes

In a January 29, 2015, episode of *Invisibilia*, a National Public Radio podcast about the invisible forces that affect us without our awareness, reporters spoke about a phenomenon known as *entanglement*. The conversation began with a description of a physics experiment in which scientists were able to isolate atoms in separate locations, change the molecular structure, and manipulate the two separate atoms into becoming one atom, though still in separate locations (Miller & Spiegel, 2015).

That's right: atoms contained in boxes four feet away from one another demonstrated simultaneous responses. These atoms are not mirror images of one another, however; they *are* one another—separate but one. This is entanglement. Charles Q. Choi (2015), in a *Live Science* article titled “Quantum Record! 3,000 Atoms Entangled in Bizarre State,” explains that scientists theorize entangled atoms may stay connected even if they are a universe apart.

Scientists are able to explain *how* to make this happen, but they still cannot explain *why* this is possible. So, why should you be fascinated with this idea of entanglement? Well, before I answer that question, let me describe another entanglement phenomenon. This may seem like common sense, but *Invisibilia* reporters also explain how psychologists have proven that a person's environment influences his or her unconscious behavior—a kind of social entanglement (Miller & Spiegel, 2015).

In one example from the podcast, an unsuspecting individual enters an elevator with groups of people who exhibit predetermined movements (like facing the wrong direction or taking their hats off at the same time). Over and over again, and with multiple test cases, the individuals follow the movements of the group. Interestingly, they are not just responding to the group's movements (unconsciously taking the same actions as the group), but they are also simultaneously following their actions.

For instance, an individual wearing a hat enters an elevator with a group of people wearing hats. Without any advance notice, the hatted folks reach up and remove their hats, and the unsuspecting individual follows suit—often without any hesitation and often at the very same time! What is the explanation for this phenomenon? Entanglement.

So why is entanglement important to educators or school leaders interested in messaging? In a world of easy access to information, the way we communicate is critically important. Our words—conversations, announcements, praise, criticism, celebration, and so on—frame the message others hear about you and your school. *Messaging* is the mindset that defines the way you communicate. It is the platform you use for promoting what others perceive and believe about you or your school. This messaging is entangled in everything you do and say. In some ways, experiments with entanglement confirm what we've always known: our surroundings influence us more than we often recognize. We may connect with one another in ways more mysterious than we've ever imagined. In other ways, entanglement opens our eyes to incredible possibilities in how we communicate and influence others (Parker, 2015a).

Here's a simple application. If you take the idea of entanglement to its logical conclusion, you must seriously grapple with the power of your position as a school leader and ask yourself some questions.

- “What persons or ideas consistently surround me, and how do these affect who I am?”
- “How do I purposely and intentionally influence my home, work, and surroundings to bring about the most positive outcomes possible?”
- “How do I tailor messages within the school environment—to teachers, students, and the community—to reflect the true culture of the school?”

As school leaders, we cannot ignore how incredibly (and sometimes mysteriously) significant a part we each play in molding the school environment. We can accomplish this molding in many ways, but I can't think of a more powerful way than messaging. The messages teachers, staff members, students, parents, and the community receive about your school culture shape their perception of the school, your leadership, and often their general opinion about education and schooling. As a school leader, it is your responsibility to positively influence the messages the school community consistently receives. You are part of a web of entangled messages and influences; how can you meaningfully play your part?

Entanglement has many implications. In the *Invisibilia* episode, scientists ask if it is possible for bits of ourselves to actually be present in the places or people with whom we are entangled—like the same atom present in two separate locations (Miller & Spiegel, 2015). Regardless of how strange or mind blowing those implications may be, one of the most powerful takeaways is simply that the people and places all around us are consciously and unconsciously entangled.

Ask yourself if you are intentional about the messaging you send about your school—both within the walls and to the community beyond them. What part do your messages play in building and supporting a positive school culture?

A Messaging Crisis

Many schools are facing a leadership crisis—not because there are no strong leaders in schools but because school leaders often do not connect with the most powerful learning moments happening in their schools, nor celebrate them. Most school leaders feel overwhelmed, overworked, and overcommitted. With the ever-increasing responsibilities of the school principal, it should be no surprise that in 2012, the Center for Public Education found that the average principal stays on the job for five years or fewer (Hull, 2012).

A school leader's job often involves putting out situational fires, responding to urgent needs, or satisfying the requests of a multitude of stakeholders. It's no wonder that school leaders must battle for time to enjoy the best parts of school—being with the students and teachers who experience amazing moments of learning and celebrating them.

Even as school leaders learn to prioritize time for the most meaningful moments of school, difficult or negative situations often make it into conversations, social media, or mainstream media. As a result, the public gains a mistaken perception that schools are generally failing.

In Richard DuFour's (2015) book *In Praise of American Educators*, he explores this popular but misguided notion that schools are failing and cites a Gallup poll asking parents how they would grade American schools:

The majority of parents gave Ds or Fs to U.S. schools. But when these same parents were asked how they would grade their own local school, the overwhelming majority assigned As or Bs . . . slightly more than 1 percent have indicated the [local] school is failing. (DuFour, 2015, p. 18)

Why is there such disparity between the perceptions of schools at large and particular local schools? Part of the reason rests with how the media generally portrays schools negatively. Also the current political divide in the United States has created incentives for politicians or lobbyists to emphasize negatives that work to their political advantage. Regardless of the reason, these larger perceptions drive public opinion. Public opinion drives public policy. And public policy provides or doesn't provide resources for our schools. Schools are providing amazing service to students, but that message is not always making it beyond the school or local community. What would happen if a movement began among school leaders to make messaging a higher priority? Imagine a different scenario for the larger perception of America's schools.

- What would happen if school leaders prioritized the incredible learning opportunities, the meaningful human connections, and the powerful engagement of their schools while strategically promoting, publishing, and celebrating those moments?
- What would happen if school leaders across a community, state, nation, or the globe committed to the same goal of encouraging and sharing positive moments?
- What would happen if you influenced the perceptions of your school or district based on overwhelming positive outcomes rather than negative, isolated incidents?