

Designing a Communications Plan for Effective School Leadership

Communications Plan Want to develop a plan for communicating with your staff using a variety of methods? Interested in looking for a way to maximize your limited resources of time and energy to create an optimal school climate where communication is NOT your number one stumbling block? I have composed a "why and how to design" a plan, what key elements need to be considered in the plan design, and the different audiences and classifications of information that needs to be communicated. The work here has two components; the first takes a look at the semantics and systematic development of a communication plan. The second component is the direct application and transfer of plan development to the communication needs of the school setting. Values of a Communication Plan

- Gives daily work a sharp focus as it provides direction for leadership and management duties/responsibilities as it allows dissemination of information
- Helps leadership set priorities; short, moderate, and long range
- Helps solicit and accrue support from "superiors" and staff to support the program and to buy into the mission and vision of leadership
- Avoids or minimizes "last minute winging it" phenomena from staff and others
- Provides a modicum of stress reduction and reduces the sense of being overwhelmed as demands "fly in" from all over
- Communicates expectations, standards, and protocol

The Communications Plan Document

- Describes the mission, vision, and objectives of the school and team
- Includes methods and processes by which these will be accomplished
- Identifies the target audiences, stakeholders, and recipients of the communication process/proper information and feedback
- Disseminates methods for making the plan organic, includes the tools, timelines, and responsibilities for information processing
- Provides for measurement and a feedback vehicle to adjust, modify, or overhaul the communications plan

Communication Vehicles and Opportunities

- Newsletters
- Mailings
- E-mails
- Local Media Outlets
- District offices
- Memoranda
- Staff/Faculty Handbook
- Announcements
- Exterior/Interior Message Boards
- District/School Media Personnel
- Auto-Dialer
- Computer Programs
- Teachers and Staff
- Quick Notes
- Thank You's
- Presentations
- Faculty Meetings
- Surveys
- Reports
- Data Dissemination
- Branding (school colors, mission/vision, display the message)
- Honors, Award and Successes of Students and Staff
- Open House

Plan Development: Timeline, Sources, How To

- Develop an initial plan prior to entering a job, but learn the school culture and current climate to "integrate" both plans; yours (mine) and existing plan
- Develop and modify as culture and circumstances warrant
- Improving communication even in small, initial steps is something everyone notices.
- Needs of the plan can be found in mission and vision statement
- Develop a formal/informal communication audit
- Do staff/student/community surveys as viable and as needed
- Staff leadership, building committees solicited for input
- Conduct department discussion and individual discussions with staff; a great addition to learning the culture, increasing visibility, by doing walk throughs

Establishing Goals and Objectives

- Establish and post in plain sight what you hope to achieve and what the communication priorities are
- Recognize the successes and accomplishments of students-honor rolls, acceptances into college, scholarships won, athletic successes, community involvement of students in ACS, Red Cross, Habitat, etc.
- Recognize the successes and accomplishments of staff-years of service, excellence, and awards, facilitate teamwork, identify special projects, create visibility and respect for staff
- Improve standing in the community by fostering a positive school image
- Improve climate and culture of school; make it a place where people want to be at on a daily basis

Identify and Engage Audiences

- Staff
- School Official
- Students
- Parents
- Strategic Partner development (Leaders and Shakers of the Community)

Community Organizations & Business and Industry/Chamber of Commerce & Media Outlets & Institutions in Community & Colleges, Technical, Trade, Vocational, and Business Schools in Community & Educational Hierarchy & Alumni Groups & Tactics & Training/Media Kits for All Point People (District and Building administrators/coaches/others as identified) & Newsletters from Multiple Levels (District/Building/Department/Academic) & Video Postings on the Internet/District Website & Employee Newsletters & Mailbox Messages/Pay Stub Stuffers & Student Plan incorporates morning announcements, school and grade level newsletters, message boards, and daily broadcasts (school TV station, Parent communication-monthly calendar. Parent & partner e-mails & Miscellaneous (could be used in all aspects) brochures, press releases, letter writing campaign & DEVELOP AND STAY ON MESSAGE

Communication Implementation: *“A school based application”* **LEVEL: LOW LEVEL**
AUDIENCE: ALL STAFF & **Examples of Issues:** Smaller, seemingly unimportant, minutiae of the building. These are the small things that can build relationships, trust, and leadership. They include important dates, birthdays, weddings, events around holidays, and knowing a person’s “story” or names of spouse, children etc. While they are “secondary” to the operation of the building, they build bridges people will cross when we move up the communication mountain. Small details matter to people. **Communication Methods:** E-mails, card, notes in boxes, quick news flashes, monthly newsletters listing personal column details, wishing happy birthday or other public acknowledgments of success and importance. **Feedback Plan:** Personalized requests, developing a personal inventory, delegating a place such as a personal recognition box in the mailroom. Pay attention to anecdotal feedback and observing personal relationships develop. Be out and about and listen to what others are saying. **LEVEL: MAINTENANCE ISSUES, AUDIENCE: STAFF, STUDENTS, SUPPORT PERSONNEL** & **Examples of Issues:** Information that is needed for people to perform their duties, responsibilities, and perform as best as possible. These are the bureaucratic details. This would include bell schedules, marking period dates; progress reporting dates, testing schedules, and similar nuts and bolts information people need to know. **Communication Methods:** Faculty and staff handbook, weekly bulletins, e-mail reminders, building calendars, supplying updates of events to department chairs and using broadbills. **Feedback Plan:** Overlooking basic maintenance leads to staff inconsistency and not being on the same page. Staff will let you know via e-mail and other ways. Sending out a monthly or quarterly “how are we doing” and “what can I do to help you” simple response tool or survey that culls comments and feedback. A suggestions box would be a possible start. **LEVEL: SHARING KNOWLEDGE THOUGHTS AUDIENCE: STAFF, DEPARTMENTS, CENTRAL OFFICE< PARENTS** & **Examples of Issues:** Teaching and learning methods such as cooperative learning, authentic assessments, designing varied lessons, more use of the multi-intelligence teaching theory, book groups, curriculum design, and data applications for improving instruction. Some of these may on the next level up the mountain as well depending on local culture and the history of the building. **Communication Methods:** In person type of information processing through faculty meetings, some e-mail correspondence to staff, use of support staff, group meetings and other more personal “face time” approaches. **Feedback Plan:** Suggestion box in office, open door policy, surveys, being visible and listening to what people are saying and how they are saying it. **LEVEL: SHARING FEELINGS** & **Examples of Issues:** This would include items and topics that may be change related, program related, or changing key, traditional values of the school. These could include curriculum modification, changes in teaching schedules, change in the structure of the day (block scheduling), new textbook adoption, changes in discipline policy, grading policies, discipline problems, and issues that cause struggle and anxiety in the staff. **Communication Methods:** As much as possible this should be face to face with individuals as needed and determined by the issue. Meeting with departments, conducting small and whole group settings, training in small groups, show visibility, leadership, and a willingness to listen to those that disagree, have fears and questions, or flat out oppose the idea. This shows leadership, courage, and commitment. People cannot stand to hear major issues from an errand boy or by way of some indirect process... it shows weakness, cowardice. and insecurity & **Feedback Plan:** This is direct and person-to-person or person to group(s). Seek out and invite the greatest skeptics in for a chat or better yet go down to their room for the discussion. It shows courage, trust and leadership as the person is on their own turf. They may not agree with you, but may give you respect for being open. **LEVEL: PEAK “Make or Break” MAJOR EVENTS TARGET AUDIENCES: Staff, Students, Parents, Community, Central Office, The Media** & **Examples of Issues:** These are the big issues, problems, difficulties that develop. In a negative sense it could be an illness of a staff member, a tragic situation with

a student, drug overdose or a student suicide. In a positive sense these are academic success, school organizations being successful. *Communication Methods* These should be communicated through a face-to-face meeting with the faculty, or other groups as needed. The building staff should be met face to face, the community and parents may be sent a letter (recent health situation), the central office should be contacted by phone ASAP in an adverse situation

Feedback Plan: Pay attention. The major crises should be followed by a debriefing session, committee meeting, or solicitation of written or e-mail input from the staff. This asks for what we did well, and what we did that needs to be looked at and improved. A short e-mail, a quick thank you, coffee and donuts in the lounge or other communication vehicle when a staff handles a crisis particularly well should be done

CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN Plan and pre-plan for the unexpected and the worse possible scenario. Have a crisis plan that informs the faculty of what to based on a Color code and that has the building crisis team go into action.

Use communication plans when responding to a crisis should have a plan built on:

ASSESSMENT OF THE CRISIS:

- What is known?
- What is possibly true but not verified?
- What is the cause of the event?
- What is the immediate harm or potential for harm?
- Where is the problem?
- What we are doing to help/control/keep people safe?

PREPARATION FOR INFORMATION FLOW:

- Act quickly.
- Inform upper management immediately (and personally).
- Determine who the ONE official spokesperson is.
- Prepare a written statement that is brief, accurate, and has the proper tone or expressions (sympathy or concern).
- Determine the best method to release the information
- Plan for media interviews
- Open communication lines
- Keep the team and leadership updated
- Provide phone numbers/ web site for further information

ACTIVATING THE PLAN

- Be open to request from media and others
- Respond in brief, factual answers
- Do not speculate
- Express concerns for those impacted by the crisis
- Be open, honest, and forthright
- Let other groups speak for themselves
- Do not point fingers or place blame

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