

## MANAGING YOUR SCHOOL

### a LeadSpace ‘just in time’ guide for first-time principals

#### 14. LEADING YOUR SCHOOL’S LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: PRINCIPAL COMMUNICATIONS

This ‘just in time’ guide offers suggestions for managing the everyday communications you apply in your role as a principal. The guide looks at:

- Communication and leadership: the big picture
- In-school communication: who with, and why
- In-school communication: things to try
- Connecting with your community
- Principals’ views on communication

This guide does not attempt to cover all elements of what is a huge topic.

##### 1. COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP: THE BIG PICTURE

*“Effective communication from management ensures that employees stay engaged in their work.... Internal communication, which was once a soft skill, has now been proved to have hard business impacts.”* Diana Clement, The New Zealand Herald July 23, 2008.

The writer goes on to suggest that best communication requires a strategy. Best practice internal communication can include:

- The chief executive being a good role model for communication and championing it.
- Words from leaders matching actions.
- Commitment to two-way communication.
- Face to face communication.
- Bad news is communicated as well as good
- Communication is seen as a management function, not a set of techniques.

While written for all businesses, the strategy has direct application to school principals. [Kiwi Leadership for Principals \(2008\)](#) reinforces this point showing how successful communication and working relationships combine in school leadership.

Many problems in and out of school can be directly traced to whether information was communicated, how it was communicated and who communicated it. Managing communications effectively is a key leadership skill. Taking time to review how you do it will be time well spent.

##### 2. IN-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION: WHO WITH AND WHY

Use a table like this to summarise your communications:

Communications Overview		
Who	Why	How?
Students		

Deputy principal / leadership team		
Teachers		
Parents		<i>Newsletter, face to face, speech/presentation, phone</i>
Office staff		
Caretaker		
Board members		
BOT Chair		
Local principals		
Mentor		

### Consider:

- At the end of the day list all the people, you communicated with between 8.00 am and 5.00 pm Include the 15-seconds or less ones too! Your results may be surprising.
- Are your reasons for communicating helping you lead the school in managing change?
- Is the way you communicate actively assisting you in problem solving?
- Is the way you communicate helping you to strengthen working relationships?
- Are there two or three aspects of communication you should emphasise during the next year?
- Is communication effectively difficult for you? What can you do to resolve it.

### 3. IN-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION: THINGS TO TRY

[Principals leading change](#) and [principals who are effective problem solvers](#) apply a range of communication skills every day.

#### How do you communicate your ideas?

Use an interviewer from outside the school, such as your mentor or principal's appraiser to carry out a fact-finding review. Here are a range of tasks an interviewer might undertake:

- Ask you the two or three most important school development actions and intentions you have been communicating to staff.
- Ask a range of staff what they think you have been communicating about and your effectiveness in communicating about those topics. The interviewer simply takes notes and does not comment on the descriptions apart from seeking clarity. Four or five staff is plenty and in a small school, there may only be at most one or two.
- Interview five or six students across a range of year levels. Ask each to describe what you have been communicating. This may be best, completed in small groups to assist the flow of description and bring out the range of views.
- Write up what he/she has discovered and then come back to you to report on the style and effectiveness of your communication. The interviewer and you may be able to identify gaps and issues. Check whether your choices made regarding the methods above are still the best ones to focus on.

After getting this snapshot of your communication, use it to help shape new communications. Include this review as part of your appraisal.

#### Useful Communication Ideas

##### A. Critical listening

Ask an experienced staff member to give frank and informative comment on any presentations you make. (Speeches, staff development lead sessions, and use of assembly could all be considered. Ask for feedback on clarity of message, quality of message, audience response and presentation style.)

This feedback should be verbal and done informally soon after the presentation.  
*You will be surprised at how this feedback helps improve your delivery of key messages.*

## **B. Visiting staff workspaces**

“By recognising the individual natures and circumstances of staff members principals strengthen trust and connectedness across the staff as a whole.” [p23 KLP](#)  
[http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/klp/area.php?id=6#Awhinatanga Guiding and supporting](http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/klp/area.php?id=6#Awhinatanga_Guiding_and_supporting)

Build understanding and rapport with staff by meeting with them in their workspaces from time to time. Not only will staff be able to put their views more clearly in context they are likely to tell you the reality of what is going on more quickly. (Some would say visit the teacher or staff member, who has to work in the poorest quality classroom or office, first.)

*Reprimand, criticism or any disciplinary communication should take place in your office where you set the stage and the level of formality you want.*

## **C. Listening to the school**

Adopt a listening approach for

- ‘sounds’ of learning such as evidence of curiosity, inquiry, earnest endeavour, shared thinking and collaboration and teacher facilitation
- ‘sounds’ of teachers shared approach to teaching such as team teaching, collaborative planning, questioning and supporting.
  
- Adopt an analytical ear for the sounds
  
- you want to hear but are absent
- you hear but would prefer not to hear.

Add all these sounds to your knowledge bank about the school and use them at appropriate times to make progress on development.

## **D. Resources**

These resources remind us that the process of school leadership requires an awareness and understanding of political process and finely tuned understanding of how emotions and feelings influence actions and reactions in a community.

[Building Trusting Relationships in School](#) – by Brewster and Rohlbeck

[Creating a Culture of Change](#) by Patterson and Rolheiser

## **4. CONNECTING WITH YOUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY**

Begin with the end in mind.

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“[Principals strengthen partnerships and networks](#) to enhance student learning.

Extend your knowledge so you become an expert on your school community. Share so education becomes everyone’s business.

Have a broad and simple community communication goal. For a new principal in a small rural school this could be: “develop and maintain strong interactive communication patterns with each family about their children’s education.”

A new principal in a large urban school may decide: “during the first year my communications within and across the school community will help me gain a clear understanding of how things are done around here.”

### **A. Your Mood, Actions and Demeanour**

Your body language, moods and actions convey powerful messages.

- A grumpy principal can easily create grumpiness in others.
- Failure to complete or carry out a routine task suggests the routine is not important. For example, missing the deadline for reports or ignoring student lapses in behaviour.
- Remaining approachable while “being regarded and consulted as a professional leader with significant knowledge about teaching and learning” (P18 KLP) requires principals to maintain a cheerful demeanour even if the going is tough.
- Remember you are now a public figure and subject to much more scrutiny than you were as a teacher. Be clear and transparent so all members of the community know that what they see is what they get. Enjoy answering questions, discussing the school vision and goals and listen attentively to all community members.

### **B. Phone Communication**

“Principals ...Demonstrate the inter-personal skills needed for [building strong relationships](#) with key stakeholder groups” (P 20 KLP)

[http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/klp/area.php?id=3#The\\_importance\\_of\\_relationships](http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/klp/area.php?id=3#The_importance_of_relationships)

- Have an enthusiastic phone voice and manner (even on the worst day!)
- Clearly identify yourself (so your name and enthusiasm are out there).
- Allow time for phone calls (answer messages within 24 hours if possible, even confirm in newsletters a best time to ring), treat them as an important part of the job.
- Try to establish a balance of five calls home to praise students for every one that is critical.
- Check the school answer-phone messages and any background tunes for hold users are compatible with the school goals and encourage contact.

### **C. Face-to-Face Communication**

- Listen carefully - seek clarification and explanation especially when the tone of the speaker is somewhat critical.
- Appreciate critics and thank them.
- Treat each conversation as being crucial. (e.g. It may be the only time this year you will speak to Mrs X).
- Ensure your agendas are applied; take advantage of face-to-face meetings to initiate new discussion about things of importance to you.

- Make notes and in particular record agreed times and dates (always try to meet the deadlines in advance). Tell the person you are talking to what you are recording.
- Difficult conversations with adults will occur. Effective relationship skills “play an important part in managing conflicts of interest, supporting and challenging teacher practices, and dealing with a range of challenges and situations. (P13 KLP.)
- An excellent book on the subject is Crucial Confrontations by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler\_2005, pub by McGraw Hill. The sub-title is “Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations and Bad Behaviour”.
  - o -The Dealing with Complaints document in this Just in Time series is helpful in giving you a strategy for some difficult situations. *Seek advice from other principals, School Trustees Association, or your Principals Association especially where employment issues are involved.*
- <http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/knowledge/pdf/dealing-with-complaints.pdf>

#### **D. School Events**

- Treat all events as great communication opportunities.
- Personally meet and greet as many parents and community members as possible.
- Create speaking opportunities where you do not speak too long but do link focus to student achievement and your school’s current goals. Make it clear what the schools core business is.
- Ensure students feel included and rewarded for effort and achievement.

#### **E. Newsletters**

- School community newsletters should provide the means to inform, promote, gather and educate. Decide on how you want the balance of these four reasons to work in each newsletter.
- Ensure they provide the means to convey important messages about your school’s strategies and plans.
- Align them to support your key leadership activities: leading and managing change, and problem solving.
- Establish and stick to a publication timetable.
- Use a template for easy preparation of the next edition (if you have a secretary share the template so your copy goes directly into the file for her/him to tidy up).
- Establish others as reporters to gather copy (if they are available).
- Quality is important but stick to the budget. Establish the highest standards for accuracy of detail and grammar. Have a neutral proof-reader!
- Set aside a specific time to do your part of the newsletter (preferably several days before publication is due).
- Online or not – you decide but remember Newsletters need to be up to date in websites and must be easy to open and download.

#### **Examples of Newsletters**

Check these out for informing, educating, gathering and promoting.

[Maungaraki School](http://www.maungaraki.school.nz/newsletters.html) <http://www.maungaraki.school.nz/newsletters.html>

[Reporoa College](http://www.reporoa.school.nz/newsletters/set/show/1) <http://www.reporoa.school.nz/newsletters/set/show/1>

#### **Resources for Newsletters**

[Newsletters R Us - possible inserts found here](#) . This has a primary school focus.

## F. Community Connections

These two packages of resources and ideas are very useful.

[Better Relationships for Better Learning](#) – use this MOE document as a valuable resource and guide to community connections.

[Building Community Relationships](#) – more resources in Leadership.

## 5. PRINCIPALS' VIEWS ON THEIR COMMUNICATION

“Effective principals have external networks that range from face-to-face through to online contacts. Networks help provide them with up-to-date and relevant knowledge about educational trends and issues.” p20 KLP

Comments in PEN (Principals Electronic Network) frequently provide practical suggestions about communication. For example:

### **Ash Maindonald – Principal, Kaiapoi Borough School – Aspects of Communication**

*(Ash has given permission for us to share his comments with you.)*

“Communication is clearly a key - I tried a couple of things that seemed to make a difference.

I visited all the classrooms and asked the children - What do you love about our school? What could make it cooler? What do you expect of me? What can I expect from you? What ideas do you have to help us build a family here?

With staff, I prepared a one hour "My Education Life Journey" presentation. I covered who I was and why? What I believed in, how I saw my role, the mistakes I'd made and the joys and successes. I was very open, honest and spoke totally from the heart. There were several teachers who shed tears at times, so I guess I spoke to their hearts. They understood what they were to me, what they are to the children and community and what the possibilities were for our journey from here together.

I publish a pretty awesome newsletter, lots of highest possible quality photos of kids and lots of different ways of getting our core messages and beliefs thru to families. It goes out every week - sometimes two a week. The three focuses for our newsletter are to Inform, to Challenge and to Celebrate.

Inform - to keep you in touch with up coming events, news and information.

Challenge - we want to produce a new generation of Thinkers.

We will be teaching children structured and systematic approaches to thinking and providing lots of opportunities to use these skills. Look out for plenty of brain challenges in our newsletter.

Celebrate - our most precious resource at KBS are our people. We want to take every opportunity to share with you the wonderful learning experiences that happen here each week.

Quality is very important to us. Our newsletter is produced on a new 'state of the art' Xerox copier. Twice a term we will use this copier to send home the newsletter in colour.

Board meetings feature slide shows of the school in action.

We welcome and encourage parents to come to our weekly whanau time - school assembly - the purpose is regularly shared (which is to share family time together; to celebrate the cool and clever things our family members have achieved; to learn more about our family and ways we can be a better family than before.)

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These are just a few ideas on Communication, which is just one of the keys to achieving buy in - but room and time constraints mean that is probably enough to digest for a start.” (PEN Conference Discussion 2006)

### **The Principal Building Relationships with Parents**

In a PEN Conference 2006, a principal made these comments in an anonymous brainstorm.

“I have found that establishing relationships with each parent who has a child at the school to be quite beneficial. I always use the common ground that we (parents and teachers) have the best interests of the child at heart. This has always been a great starting point.

Initially the process used to be quite time consuming. I try to make time for every parent (whether it is 5 or 10 minutes). I have found that it makes a huge difference for our parents that they are acknowledged.

Even parents of children who regularly find themselves in some form of strife at school value this open relationship with the school. They have expressed that they prefer being kept in the loop, even during the tougher times for their children. As a result, I know that they are just a phone call away, and are always willing to support their child, or other school initiatives.

Term gatherings help. Sometimes, it is just a simple morning tea to say thanks. At other times it is a whole school hangi. Turnout at our last parent-teacher-student interview was in excess of 90%. Parents want to make time for their children. I have told them that one way to do so, is to come and listen to their child report back on progress / student achievement at the p-t-s interview.

I think back to 2.5 years ago... things were a lot different. It was difficult to get most parents past the school gate. How things change! I put it largely down to relationship building.”

### **Conclusion**

We hope you have found this guide to principals’ communication actions has opened up some new ideas for you.

There are never ending possibilities with communication so we would appreciate other ideas for inclusion in this type of resource.

### **Feedback and Suggestions**

Suggested additions, questions or comments on this guide should be e-mailed to [leadership@tki.org.nz](mailto:leadership@tki.org.nz)