

Communication



Communication

1. Forms of Communication

There are four types of formal communication:

- Reading
- Writing
- Speaking
- Listening

We also communicate informally, often unknown to ourselves, through body language.

The way in which we speak can hugely alter the meaning we convey. Our emphasis makes this difference:

- **I** never said you stole the money
 - ◇ Statement was made, but not by me
- I **never** said you stole the money
 - ◇ I haven't said it, but I may say it at some time in the future
- I never **said** you stole the money
 - ◇ Could mean "I thought it", "I implied it" but didn't actually say it
- I never said you **stole** the money
 - ◇ I may have said you "took", "borrowed", "misplaced" or "lost" it, but you didn't actually "steal" it
- I never said you stole the **money**
 - ◇ But you may have stolen something else



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Body Language

Much research indicates that body language is more powerful than language itself. We operate at two levels: consciously through words, subconsciously through our bodies.

Non-verbal communications radiate strong messages:

- Gestures
- Breathing
- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Body posture
- Movement
- Silence



One important theory is that everybody perceives the world chiefly through one dominant sense; seeing, hearing or feeling. As a result their conversation is sprinkled with clues, pointing to the controlling sense "I hear you"; "Look at the problem"; "I feel you've missed the point".

2. Principles of Effective Communication

The communication process between two people is quite complex, but it can be summarised as follows:



The "Noise" in the above model represents the many incorrect signals which can get in the way of the message being sent. The ideal communication is where the received message or idea identifies with that which is transmitted.

Because school principals are very busy people there is often a tendency to rush in offering a "quick fix". Sometimes we fail to diagnose and to really deeply understand the problem first.

"Seek first to understand, then to be understood"

Active or Empathic Listening

We presume that, because we are so often engaged in conversation, we are able to listen effectively. However, there is a crucial difference between listening in everyday conversation and active listening which is an important professional skill. When you are holding a conversation with someone you are only partially listening to what they are saying. Your thoughts are also on what you are going to say next. In professional listening you are totally oriented on what the other person is saying. You are in "receive mode" using your eyes and ears to gather as much information as possible.

The fact that we tend to assume our own interpretation of the word is the same as everybody else's interpretation, is the most common cause of failure in communication.

The skill of listening is much more difficult to attain than the skill of talking. Improving listening involves the following:

- Learn to listen to the emotional as well as the factual content of what is being said
- Take note of what is not being said
- Learn to pick up hints dropped, which may provide an opening into an area of concern
- Wait for the "door-knob question" - the issue raised by the person on the way out
- Reduce distractions such as noise to a minimum (especially the telephone)

- Sit in such a way that you can see all of the speaker at the same time. This enables eye contact but also allows you to pick up on the non-verbal cues which the speaker may be sending. Eye contact should be maintained for a substantial portion of the time (say 60%). Overdoing it can be threatening
- Ensure that your non-verbal communication is appropriate: open posture, leaning forward slightly, good eye contact, nodding and encouraging
- Learn to take notes, if you deem them necessary, while looking at the speaker as much as possible
- Beware of selective listening: only hearing what you want to hear

The homework journal is an easy way for teachers to communicate briefly with parents, provided it is the practice in the school for parents to sign the journal each night. Otherwise they may not see the journal.

An occasional Principal's Newsletter is an effective way to keep parents in the loop regarding school issues.

School websites provide an effective conduit for informing parents about school matters, provided of course that they are regularly updated. Many schools also have a Parent Association space on their websites.

IPPN's TextaParent.ie is now used by the vast majority of Irish schools as a means of quickly contacting parents. Principals can send texts from any computer or smartphone, whether in school or at home.

3. Home-School Communication

Why?	
Constitution:	Rights of parents under Bunracht na hÉireann and the Education Act
Sociological:	Children do better
Psychological:	Develops positive attitudes both in children and parents
Professional:	Research indicates that it makes for more effective schools
Practical:	Common sense

The most effective form of parent-teacher communication is probably face-to-face. In a busy working school this is not always easy to achieve, but it is incumbent on schools to put arrangements in place that ensure that parents with concerns can always, at a mutually convenient time, speak with their child's teacher or the school principal.

Many teachers use the school phone outside of class-time to ring parents about issues concerning their child. This can often allay misunderstandings which might otherwise develop.

4. Handling Complaints

- Listen without interruption
- Don't get defensive
- Use the "sad but glad" statement
- Express empathy
- Ask questions to clarify the problem
- Find out what the complainant actually wants
- Explain what you can do and cannot do
- Discuss alternatives fully
- Take action
- Follow up and ensure satisfaction



5. Dealing with Conflict

For many people, their instinctive reaction is to shy away from conflict if at all possible. Unfortunately, not addressing the causes of a conflict situation can often allow the matter to fester.

Sooner or later one is forced to deal with the issue. There are some important skills and techniques which can help:

- Talk directly
- Choose a good time
- Plan ahead
- Don't blame or name call
- Give information
- Listen
- Show that you are listening
- Talk it all through
- Work on a solution
- Follow through



6. Staff Team Building

Good teams share a common purpose and vision. Take time as a staff (Croke Park Hours?) to collectively decide the values that drive your school. What REALLY matters? Decide, after lots of whole-staff discussion, on the wording of a mission statement. Be sure that it is one by which all staff members are happy to live.



All staff members should feel safe to say what they feel and think. Never allow a staff member to dismiss or rubbish what another staff member is proposing. Instead, treat even the most unlikely suggestions as valid and worthy of staff consideration.

Always ensure that young staff members are listened to as much as their elders. Senior staff members are not solely gifted with superior intellect or creativity. Encourage quiet, or shy staff members to contribute their views at staff meetings. Still waters often run deep.

Encourage people to really listen, even where they may not initially agree, to the views of their colleagues.

Ensure as a school leader that your staff always receive appreciation rather than criticism. Praise, provided that it is sincere, helps us all to grow.

In the best schools people are always open to new ideas. Just because you have been doing something in a certain way for the last twenty years, does not necessarily mean that there is not a better way to do it.

Encourage innovation. If it doesn't work you can always revert to the old way. Good team members are essentially supportive. Everyone is glad for everyone to excel.

Undercurrents are brought out and sorted with good will and generosity. As principal, always keep your ear open for ripples of discontent and address them at the earliest opportunity.

7. Chairing Meetings

In any good group of people there will be a number of different and potentially conflicting personality types. In addition, there will be a number of different learning styles.



A good Chairperson helps the meeting to run smoothly. They will make sure that:

- All the business is discussed
- The views of all are heard
- Clear decisions are reached
- The meeting starts and finishes on time

A good chair will also:

Always be thinking about the meeting overall and not just the topic under discussion. This can make it more difficult for the chair to participate in the discussions.

They will always aim to draw a balance between hearing everyone's views

and getting through the business. They will never use their position as Chairperson as an opportunity to put forward their views to the exclusion of others, or to dominate the meeting.

No one can do this without the co-operation and agreement of the whole meeting – the Chairperson is not a miracle worker! Everyone can learn how to chair well, it just takes a bit of thought and practice. You will get more confident with experience. Try watching how other people chair meetings and seeing what works and what doesn't.

8. The Skills of Giving Feedback

Giving feedback to staff members, to parents or indeed to students is a skill which needs to be considered. It is all too easy to give the wrong message, or for that matter, to give the right message but in the wrong way.



The following may help:

- Be clear about what you want to say in advance
- Start with a positive. If the positive is registered first, anything that follows is more likely to be listened to and acted upon
- Focus on the behaviour rather than the person. It is important to describe what a person is doing that you like or dislike, rather than to comment on what you think of that person
- Refer to the behaviour or skill you wish to reinforce or see changed. It is not helpful to give a person feedback about something on which they cannot change. Give them feedback on something which they can work
- Offer alternatives. If you find it necessary to offer negative feedback, then do not simply criticise, but rather suggest what the person could have done differently. Turn the negative into a positive suggestion
- Be specific rather than general. Tell the person what you saw or heard and the effect it had on you. "I" statements are always good. "I feel upset when you say...". In other words, "I have a problem and you can

help me resolve it."

- Give the feedback as soon as you can after the event. The only exception to this would be when you might be so angry, that you would be unlikely to give constructive feedback

9. Conclusion

Don't push. Be patient. Be respectful. People don't have to open up verbally before you can empathise. You can empathise at all times. You can be sympathetic, sensitive, aware and you can temporarily live outside your own autobiography when it is necessary.

When we really deeply understand each other we open the door to creative solutions and third alternatives. Differences are no longer stumbling blocks to communication and progress. Instead they become stepping stones to synergy.

Useful Resources

- [Supporting Each Other](#) - A Guide to best practice for the effective partnership between Principals and Parent Associations by the National Parents Council & IPPN
- [Staff Communications](#) - Páirc Clerkin,
- [Managing Relationships with Difficult Adults in the School](#) - Dr. Joe O'Connell
- [Complaints, Conflicts and Communication](#) - Angela Lynch, Pg 25, Leadership+ Issue 65
- [Textparent.ie](#) - It is a simple web-based system that is fast, reliable and cost effective. TextaParent.ie enables schools to communicate with parents quickly and easily by sending instant text messages to the school community – parents, members of staff etc.