

# Clear Communication: Lowering the SBO Stress Level

*Clear communication across the district can increase productivity and decrease stress on the job.*

By David Bein, SFO, and Jennifer Hermes



“**H**ow was your day today?” That’s a common question, but, as a school business official, you’ve probably struggled to answer it. How many times have you gone home exhausted, wondering where your day went and how it could be possible that you worked that hard and yet didn’t get anything on your to-do list completed?

The way we and others view our productivity often depends on opinion and perspective. Senator Daniel Moynihan said, “You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.”

Business managers interact with everyone from students to support and instructional staff, to boards of education, to community members, to legislators. These stakeholders’ knowledge about education trends, best practices, school finance, legal requirements, and state and federal politics varies dramatically from each other’s and from our own. Not only does their knowledge about facts differ, so do their opinions about what facts are important.

To work effectively with this diverse community, we must take the time to listen and understand their perspectives, and we must ensure we clearly communicate who we are and what we do. By doing that, we should decrease our stress level and increase our productivity.

## Who You Are

We surveyed school business managers in the Chicago suburban area and discovered that for the most part, business managers believe that board members see them as simple accountants, unaware of the complexity of the job and the broad span of responsibility. However, if you are prepared with an answer to the question, “What exactly do you do?” you can help your board better understand the level and scope of responsibility for your position. When you describe your responsibilities, tailor your description based on the background of the person asking, and practice so that you can answer the question, “What do you do?” in 30 seconds or less.

You also can take the opportunity at board meetings, committee meetings, and staff meetings to describe your major focus areas and provide status updates—this can start valuable dialogue about resource availability and deployment. A good rule of thumb is to always have three things to say about any topic that might come up, whether it’s about a different aspect of the topic or a different perspective based on your job responsibilities in areas such as finance, facilities, insurance, etc.

Having something to say also extends to administrative staff meetings. While conversations about topics

such as Common Core State Standards, SIOP, and least restrictive environment may seem out of the realm of the business office, they are not. What you do affects every aspect of the district, including curriculum and student services. Your contribution to these discussions can be invaluable, even if it entails simply asking a question that causes others to approach the topic from a different point of view.

These discussions also can provide opportunities for you to save time and effort by engaging others in early resource planning and efficient operational structuring of activities.

## What You Do and Know

As you open lines of communication with your board, district, and community, you will have the opportunity to cultivate a reputation as trustworthy and plainspoken. Particularly when dealing with financial matters, there can be a tendency to shoot the messenger when there is bad news, but your responsibility is to make the best recommendation possible whether it is popular or not.

Ensuring that others know you share common goals can make those conversations simpler and less stressful. By speaking from a student-centered perspective, you can convey that the goal is to provide strong educational programs within the constraints of the financial resources available. That can help lead to discussions and effective decision making surrounding the often-difficult tradeoffs that must be made.

Limited resources not only affect staffing and programs, but also affect how much work school business managers accomplish. To be effective, you must be vastly indifferent to a great many worthwhile activities. Letting your superintendent or board know what

the tradeoffs on your time are is important in managing your workload. Your superintendent can be of great assistance by vetting requests for special projects or information. For example, board requests should come from the board as a whole, not from an individual board member.

Take the opportunity to stress to board members that they must set priorities, share those priorities with you, and not be afraid to say “no” to programs that take resources from a more pressing priority.

The Chicago-area board members we surveyed indicated that fighting fires is the least important thing that business managers do. The business managers we surveyed at the same time indicated that they spent most of their time fighting fires. Evaluating and addressing issues as they come up, however, can result in time savings in the long run. Investing a little time and energy into putting out a small fire now can often prevent it from becoming a full blown blaze, consuming even more of your time and energy later.

Clear and open two-way communication can help you understand where others are coming from and can ensure you spend your time on the most important matters. Developing and strengthening communication channels can reduce the stress you experience on the job, give you more time during the day, and make it much easier to say, “I had a great day today” when you get home at night.

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## EDUCATION EXPENDITURES AND REVENUE BY THE NUMBERS

According to the National Center for Education Statistics:

- The 50 states and the District of Columbia reported \$597.5 billion in revenues collected for public elementary and secondary education in fiscal year 2010 (FY 10). Adjusted for inflation, local revenues remained level, state revenues decreased by 7.7%, and federal revenues increased by 24.6% for FY 10 compared to FY 09.
- Current expenditures totaled \$525.5 billion in FY 10. Expenditures for instruction amounted to \$321.9 billion, total support services accounted for \$182.3 billion, food services were \$20.0 billion, and enterprise operations accounted for \$1.3 billion.
- Total expenditures for public elementary and secondary education were \$607.2 billion in FY 10, including \$525.5 billion in current expenditures, \$45.6 billion in facilities acquisition and construction, \$3.3 billion in land and existing structures, \$6.8 billion in equipment, \$8.4 billion for other programs, and \$17.7 billion in interest on debt.
- When expenditures for instruction were combined with instruction-related services such as libraries, in-service teacher training, curriculum development, student assessment, and instruction technology, they totaled \$347.1 billion, or 66.1 percent of all current expenditures for public elementary and secondary education in FY 10.

From *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2009–10 (Fiscal Year 2010). First Look*. By Stephen Q. Cornman, Jumaane Young, and Kenneth C. Herrell. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2013/2013305.pdf>