

Communicating to Build Trust and Confidence

How you communicate can determine your stakeholders' perception of your district.

By Jeff Olefson and Ed Arum

Working effectively with stakeholders is a common challenge for school business officials and noninstructional school leaders. SBOs are often frustrated by unrealistic expectations and a lack of appreciation for their efforts. What's more, they are often blamed for things over which they have no control.

One might blame lack of communication, and in a sense that's true. But it doesn't have to be that way. By applying a few simple concepts, it's possible to change stakeholder perceptions of you and your department. That's the good news. The bad news is that it won't happen instantly. Stakeholders did not develop their notions in a day, and they won't change them because of one positive experience. It is harder to build trust and confidence than to erode them, which is all the more reason to get started immediately.

First, the Basics

You must deliver. Apologies are not a substitute for getting things right. You don't want your stakeholders to say that you are good at giving apologies because you've had to do it so often. But doing things right is not enough; you have to manage perceptions and expectations.

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Before you try to change perceptions, you must understand how they were created. Imagine yourself on the other side of the desk. When your stakeholders have a problem, do they look forward to talking with you or do they dread it? Why? Do you make it easy for stakeholders to contact you and work with you? Are your current procedures "stakeholder friendly"? If not, fix them.

Generally, when people call or email you, they have a problem, which means they may be anxious. Anxious people contact you constantly for updates, complain to



higher-ups if they aren't satisfied with what you provide, and often demand that you drop whatever you are doing to attend to their problems.

You can't always solve their problems immediately. What you can do, however, is reduce their anxiety by ensuring that they know what to expect from you. Most people will judge you by the criteria you give them. In the absence of that information, they will establish their own expectations about whether you will deliver.

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Promises, Promises

Consider the following situation. Someone asks you for some data. You say, “OK, I will take care of it.” At what point does that person decide that you took too long to fulfill your promise? After concluding that you were late, what will he or she do? Bad news travels up and it is often our fault—in this case, it’s not because you failed to get things done within a reasonable time frame but because you neglected to let the stakeholder know when.

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The lesson is simple: always tell people when they can expect you to complete a task, but build in a little “wiggle room.” No one is going to fault you for being early. If stakeholders have a problem with your delivery date, they will let you know right away and you can still be the hero by providing an accommodation. Sometimes, what you say and what the stakeholders hear are very different. Use simple, commonly understood language and confirm details in writing to limit miscommunication.

Make your promises as specific as possible, especially for short-term commitments. When you tell someone, “I will take care of it this afternoon,” you are thinking by 4:00 p.m., but the stakeholder is thinking 12:30 p.m. Saying “I will have this for you no later than 3:00”

avoids the confusion. Make sure you have a process in place to keep you on deadline. Receiving an alert on the due date is not as productive as setting up a series of alerts days ahead.

Taking the Blame

Fulfilling promises is one thing; avoiding being blamed for things that are beyond your control—such as construction projects held up by the weather—is different. The more your stakeholders understand the process, the less likely they will blame you for problems. Walk stakeholders through the process, describing how long it typically takes for each step. Then keep them updated when each step—especially those that involve you—is completed.

Even with the best systems and intentions, mistakes will happen. It is important to know what to say and do when things go wrong. The perfect apology has three parts in a specific order:

1. Admit it was your fault (unless there is a potential legal liability).
2. Indicate what you are going to do to remedy the situation going forward.
3. Have the stakeholder hear you think aloud about ways to ensure that it does not happen in the future.

Don’t beat yourself up if you handled a situation in a less than perfect way. Learn from the experience. Effective communication is a practiced skill that will help you move forward.

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