



# e - communication

## What principals need to do to keep up with the new generation of teachers



I am a veteran teacher with more years behind me than in front of me. But if you have a message to communicate, don't put a paper memo in my mailbox.

Oh, I'll read it. But I may lose it soon after. And since I'm adviser to the school's Think Green Club, I may ask why the message warranted a full piece of paper, photocopied more than 100 times.

While I love face-to-face contact, I know it is not always possible. And when a meeting won't work, I rarely resort to paper. Instead, I email, text, upload and download. I check out blogs and contribute to them. I update my own Web sites and check others when they are updated. I subscribe to RSS feeds. I fill out forms online. I maintain a Facebook page. I organize all of my virtual files and back them up. I don't lose files on the desk or throw them away or wonder why photocopies had to be made.

And let me repeat: *I'm one of the old folks.*

My younger colleagues live even more comfortably in this brave new world. They, for the most part, do not subscribe to a newspaper but instead gather their news and opinions online. They don't have a landline phone, only a cell. They have not only a Facebook but also a MySpace page and that's how they keep up with their friends from around the world. They might even have a different, more professional MySpace page through which they communicate information to students and parents. They watch TV shows online and pirated movies. And instead of doing a crossword puzzle during your faculty meeting, they are tinkering with their cell phone: looking at their calendar, at messages, or maybe playing a game — the virtual equivalent of the crossword puzzle.

How do high school principals communicate with the new generation of teachers, and for that matter, with those like me, who now play with their toys?

Yes, the world has changed dramatically, but one principle remains: *We all want information that is clear, concise and accurate.* When I started teaching more than 20 years ago, the most common complaint about administrators had to do with poor communication.

That remains true today: A poor communicator will not succeed as a high school principal.

It seems logical, then, to work with contemporary tools when trying to communicate effectively with staff. That means rethinking lecture-based faculty meetings, paper memos, and big packets handed out at the beginning of the school year. Instead, communicating today should include effective use of email, Web sites, and blogs.

Before going further into specifics, let me address the objections a principal might reasonably bring up.

### ***I can wait out this trend.***

Even if it is true that one could "wait this out"— and those retiring soon probably could — the statement suggests that this "trend" will go away. The explosion in technology, which has completely transformed how people communicate, is *not* going away. As tech-savvy as I am, I count myself among the red-faced masses who once pledged to never get a cell phone and then to never use text messaging. All I learned is never say never.

Rooted in notion of waiting something out is nostalgia. Trends can seem bad whereas the "way we've always done it" is good. After all, we still use the Socratic method, and if the weath-

er allows it, we could even conduct a Socratic seminar under a tree. True enough, Socrates was perhaps the first great teacher. But I know of teachers today who conduct Socratic seminars in their online classes. The two worlds can meet.

**The learning curve is steep.**

That would be true if I were proposing that principals become computer programmers. Remember: *Effective leadership requires good communication.* Understanding the new virtual world doesn't change the fact that principals still need to use words, still need to consider tone, and still need to be responsive to what others say. The medium may change, but it still comes down to the message.

So how does a Web site get set up, or a blog site? Easy. Find a staff member. Assuming your school is large enough, you will be surprised at how many are able to help you. Blog sites are particularly easy (and I might add, free) to set up. Web sites tend to be more complex, depending on the desired bells and whistles. The competent staff member can set up a blog in an hour or less. The Web site might require a couple weeks. If you're lucky you might find a staff member who wants to improve his or her skills in this area. That, as the mov-

ie says, is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

### **Time, as always, is the enemy.**

Time is a problem for all stakeholders. *Do I have time to write this email? Do I even have time to read through all my emails?* These questions are typical among overworked professionals. But it still comes down to one fundamental question: *Can I afford to not communicate effectively with all stakeholders?* Of course, the answer is no. When the mission is vital, time must be made. Now, having said that, what really is the difference between typing a memo for email and typing a memo for photocopying? If anything, the latter approach is *more* time-consuming.

Technology is frustrating. It has long been promoted as a way to save us time, and while it does in some respects, we still never feel like we have time. The problem there, I suspect, is in ourselves, not in the machine.

So, what are some steps a principal could comfortably take to improve communication and better reach younger staff members?

#### **1. Establish email protocols.**

Nearly every school has email, which should mean that every teacher has a professional email address. Ideally this email should be accessible off-site. Assuming the universality of email, the following standards can be established:

- Certain messages are delivered via email only, such as bulletins.
- Staff members are expected to check email daily, just as they would collect their mail.
- Non-professional email (e.g. who wants a lost cat?) should be strongly discouraged.
- Links to the school Web site (or server) should be frequent.
- Principal's message (weekly? bi-weekly?) may be delivered via email.

Let's consider just the final standard: a regular principal's message. The subject line of the email should be constant. It could be generic (Principal's Message) or cute (Weekly Paw Prints). The format of the newsletter should be the same, maybe an **ALL CAPS ALL BOLD** subject followed by a paragraph that goes into detail. Email links can easily be embedded. For example: For those who have questions about the grade sheet, contact [jsmith@...](mailto:jsmith@...) Fol-



low a standard timetable (every other Thursday?) so that readers come to expect it, just as those from my generation still expect the morning paper on the driveway by a certain time. You can make announcements, clear up confusions, and praise those who are doing a good job — all without expending a single sheet of paper.

And yes, the same concept can be extended to parents. A parent newsletter can be emailed on a regular basis.

#### **2. Establish a school Web site.**

Likely a school Web site already exists. What I mean is a center where helpful material can be uploaded so that stakeholders can later download it. This could include calendars, evaluation materials and field trip procedures. No longer should we be distributing school handbooks that resemble a department store catalogue. It is not just the waste of paper (though that is worth noting) but also the likelihood that a big dusty tome will just sit on a shelf. If files sit on a network, we are less bothered. They tend to be easier to find. And when we print them, they are crisp and new and ready to go.

Some questions need to be asked when it's time to put together a Web site, and they mostly relate to audience. Is this for staff, parents, students, or all? Should there be different links for the different stakeholders? Are there some files for teachers that should be password-protected so that students and parents can't access them?

Again, find the staff member who will help you. That person can help with all of those questions.

#### **3. Get discussions going with blogs.**

When teachers complain about communication, they are not asking for more memos in their boxes. Teachers want to be included in decisions that in-

volve them. If they don't literally "get a vote," they at least want their viewpoint heard. How viewpoints shared in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century paradigm? Easy. Have a meeting.

No matter how frustrating meetings can be, they are also frustrating. Teachers want them so their voices can be heard, but they can only fit so much into their schedules. We can all relate to the sight of several educators taking out their pocket calendars (or cell phones) to look for a common available date and time?

Now imagine the 21<sup>st</sup> Century alternative: a discussion blog.

Let's say a school is considering block schedule. Rather than assemble a group in the library one day after school, when not everyone can attend and when only some voices will be heard, the discussion can take place online. Parameters are set. For example, the discussion will take place for two weeks. Someone (principal? committee leader?) starts the discussion with an opening post. Others respond — adding new points, disagreeing with previous points, or going into greater detail. Because we are not dealing with the constraint of time (namely, a one-hour meeting) or the reality that some people prefer to be quiet in discussions, a large number of diverse comments may be gathered. And, at the end of two weeks, the committee should truly be able to say that they have a pulse on how the staff feels.

Beyond these simple steps, who knows? If, perhaps, all teachers need to hear a certain presentation, why not put it on video so that it could be watched at anytime, not just one time at a faculty meeting? How about going to a survey development site, such as Survey Monkey, and developing a quick set of questions for staff to answer? Could all teachers put PDF versions of their syllabi online for all to see? The possibilities are endless.

The reality is, the newest teachers have more in common with current students than they do with older staff. They are glued to cell phones and they "chat" online. We can shake our heads in dismay or we can find ways to speak their language. Once we learn that language, we might find that they are voicing the same concerns as teachers always have.