

## Great Communication Means Great Schools by Jack Bender

As families with children turn more of their attention to the beginning of school, one concern includes, “What relationship will my child have with teachers?” As important as that question is, a similar yet critical question is asked less frequently - “What relationship exists among educators?”

Why is this question important?

The quality of relationships and conversations educators have among themselves is directly related to the quality of an education that a student receives. Knowledge is the result of social interaction. The degree to which educators share their craft with each other and reach agreements determine what a school and a school system can offer a student.

The science and art of effective communication is elusive. We underestimate the complexity of nearly all contexts and the skills, attitudes and mindsets needed for effective dialog to take place.

Some of the conditions for successful discussions include:

**Space** – Chairs arranged in a circle imply equality and unity, and invite all gathered to contribute.

**Direction** – If those in dialog speak to the center of the circle (contributing to the shared truth) there is less chance for individuals to take offense. An opposing view is no longer interpreted as a personal attack.

**Rules** – “Don’t fix someone else” is a simple yet essential rule. Honoring that guideline frees people to speak without threat of reprisal. When all contributions are respected, the discussion becomes rich and deep from the free flow of a variety of perspectives. Another simple rule, “Speak, only if you can improve on the silence,” (a Quaker adage) slows down the most verbal, opening spaces for others to talk.

**Expectations** – If we recognize that conflict is natural and expect it to materialize, we are less apt to become indignant when it occurs and then hunt for the scapegoat that caused the mess.

**Training** - If we expect conflict we can prepare for it in advance through training, adopting a discussion model and establishing conflict resolution methods. Gridlock, mistrust, competition and bruised relationships are by-products of unpreparedness.

**Time** – Effective dialog takes large blocks of time. Short change this dimension and the need to compete skyrockets “to get a word in.” Ideas become more important than people, even when those ideas have to be rapidly formed and quickly stated.

**Values** – While America is a democracy, does that ideal really extend to the dialog within the organization? Do members really respect each other’s rights to an opinion and free speech? Do we really acknowledge that everyone in the room is an equal?

**Listening** - Dialog is as much about listening as talking. Feeling that you’ve been heard is a powerful experience. That gift is bestowed when colleagues value “being present” to one another.

**Power** – At the onset, all gathered deserve to know how their work will bear fruit. What is the *real* purpose of the meeting(s)? Are the major decision-makers present and willing to act on the work of the group?

**Representation** – Is the whole system in the room? Are the horizontal and vertical divisions of the organization present? If the whole system is well represented, the need to secure “buy-in” is reduced and consequences of a proposed change will be known in advance.

**Courage** – When diverse views create tension and chaos, courage is required. Belief in the process and the human spirit helps discussion leaders stay the course. “Don’t just do something – stand there,” is counter-intuitive, but wise counsel. “Doing nothing” is a powerful strategy that avoids fleeing, rescuing, fixing and scapegoating. Staying with the mess provides the opportunity for a bridging/integrating statement to be made.

Our children deserve an excellent education, one that has as its foundation educators that get along – those that have intelligently and courageously formed an authentic community of care.

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616-748-9677