



How to Build Communication Success in Your School

A Guide for School Leaders

By Karen Dempster, Justin Robbins

© 2017 – Routledge

Abstract of each chapter

Introduction:

This book is based on over 30 years of experience of two corporate communication professionals who want to bring their experiences from the corporate world to education to make a positive difference. They are both parents and have experienced the frustration of school communication not being as good as it could be. This book should serve as a practical guide for teachers and school leaders.

Chapter 1: Communication matters

Effective communication is the life-blood of success. Whether in personal relationships, or in the boardroom. Communication creates results in all walks of life. While corporate business has adopted communication as a way of creating competitive advantage, schools have been slow to follow. Two corporate communications experts and a progressive teacher who have a passion for making a difference in education have come together to create the ultimate step-by-step approach to achieving better academic results through effective communication.

This chapter sets out the parameters within which this book has been written. It is aligned to the *National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers (2015)*. It provides an 'inside out' approach to creating and communicating a compelling vision for schools, building leadership communication skills and supporting the management of day-to-day communications in schools. Putting this into action will support a headteacher in attracting and retaining the best teachers and students and building the reputation of their school, while potentially reducing their traditional marketing budget.

Chapter 2: Hear from the parents

Our independent research with parents has highlighted communication as a fundamental issue for them. Parents want to be heard but don't always feel that there are ways for them to ask questions or give feedback. Parents rate communication from a school as a crucial factor in deciding where to send their child. The *National Standards* call for positive relationships with parents and yet parents feel they don't have a voice and teachers aren't good at communicating with them.

This chapter examines the relationship between how a school communicates and how parents feel about that school. It highlights what is important to parents regarding school communication and looks into the common issues that currently exist. While the feedback is both positive and negative, it is clear that at a time when expectations on both teachers and pupils are increasing, the opportunity to better engage parents in the educational process appears to be somewhat falling behind where it needs to be.

Chapter 3: How are you doing?

The purpose of this chapter is to give a headteacher a means to baseline their current state. It contains 25 questions with graded answers that focus on the key areas of achieving the vision, perception of others outside the school, consistency and clarity of communications, parent / student views and the broader education environment. This will produce a range of results that are aligned to the Ofsted rankings of Inadequate, Requires Improvement, Good and Outstanding. From this starting point a headteacher can identify on which areas they need to work.

Chapter 4: Your starting point: your vision

Each school has a vision for its pupils. It is important this vision is lived every day by every member of the teaching staff. They need to feel like they own the vision. The headteacher needs to ensure the school vision resonates with their teaching team. This means discussing it, developing it if necessary, creating co-ownership of it and communicating it compellingly in everything that they do.

This chapter takes a headteacher through the steps needed to develop a compelling and meaningful vision for their school. It explains how to ensure this vision is grounded and that it has real meaning for parents, teachers, students and governors. It describes actions to understand the gaps between the vision and reality.

Chapter 5: What is holding you back?

Schools face common issues with regards to communicating effectively. This includes areas such as information overload, a lack of understanding by parents as to how they should get involved, a lack of two-way communication channels and technology that is out running even the most advanced communication processes. The test in the previous chapter highlights areas where improvements could be made.

Another critical factor that holds the communication capability of a school back is identified as teachers themselves. Given that the normal route to qualify as a teacher does not include formal communication skills training, it is an area of critical importance when teachers are one of the main contact points with parents, and of course children.

Chapter 6: Know your audiences

A headteacher should be clear who they need to communicate with, understand their levels of interest and influence and communicate with them appropriately. Particularly crucial are those who have the most influence over the school's success, as these should be a priority audience.

This chapter provides a headteacher with a framework for determining who are the most important audiences and where to focus effort. It offers guidance regarding how to communicate with them in the best way depending on their needs. It encourages headteachers to look beyond obvious audiences, to those where there is real value for the school.

Chapter 7: Create your own Marketing advantage

Headteachers should not confuse marketing for communication. Traditional marketing techniques and how they are used are described here in detail. These channels can be costly and often lead to a lack of authenticity. It is much more compelling if a parent shares a positive story about a school with their network of friends and family.

This chapter provides a headteacher with best practice ways to create authentic engagement and advocacy. This includes the use of social media, traditional media, better use of existing channels like websites and students. It also focuses on ways to really listen and re-use what is heard to create an advantage.

Chapter 8: Build your skills

The way in which a headteacher communicates sets the standard for their school. Inspirational communication through the positive use of style, tone, body language and storytelling will create a positive impression that other teachers will seek to follow.

This chapter examines a headteachers' role as leader of the school to ensure that the school has a motivated, respected and effective teaching staff to deliver a high-quality education for all pupils. There is a detailed step-by-step process to guide headteachers through the process of ensuring that their personal communications, whether with one or many people, carry maximum impact.

Chapter 9: Inspire and motivate

The way senior school leaders behave and communicate set the standard for the school. Best practice communication skills, which are described in detail in this chapter, build trust, which when aligned to a school's common purpose will drive outstanding relationships with all key audiences. The most important factor throughout is that being clear on outcomes at the start of any communication will help to ensure it is successful whether that is in front of a large audience or on an individual basis.

This chapter provides a framework for senior school leaders to follow to ensure their communications are inspirational and engaging in the long term (not just around key school calendar events).

Chapter 10: Stop the overload

Too much information is often worse than none at all. In an eagerness to share information schools are often sending too much information to key audiences, especially parents. There is a need for processes and proper management of information. It is also critical that a school still takes opportunity to engage with key audiences on a face-to-face basis.

This chapter outlines the common pitfalls of many school communication systems. It provides a simple process that can be implemented to streamline and prioritise messages to ensure audiences are not overloaded. There are further recommendations for schools that wish to put more time and money into this area. It also supports schools in being able to listen to ideas and feedback in a manageable way.

Chapter 11: Take the technology advantage

Aligned to an overload of information is the opportunity to maximize the use of technology for communication. The common pitfalls are described here allowing any school to identify with the challenges. Best practice use of technology is an important and realistic way to turn recipients into advocates.

This chapter describes options open to a school to make better use of modern technology in an engaging and authentic way.

Chapter 12: Communicating change

A poorly managed change can have a catastrophic impact on the reputation of a school. Having a thought through and proactive communication plan to support any form of major change within a school will go a long way to ensuring the change is implemented effectively. The impact of not doing so is likely to be teachers leaving and damage to the school's reputation. In this chapter we walk you through ways to support change happening successfully in a school.

Chapter 13: When crisis hits

If a school is faced with a sudden and unexpected incident it is important that communication with the media, staff, pupils and parents is managed in a coordinated and planned way. While it is impossible to plan for the unexpected, it is possible to plan how to deal with it once it happens to avoid unnecessary worry and minimise the potential negative impact.

This chapter provides some examples of when crisis communication measures may be required. It provides a practical step-by-step process to ensure that preparation is made in advance of, during and after a crisis situation. It also includes guidance on dealing with the media and other interested parties such as parents.

Chapter 14: Communicating inclusively

Inclusive communication means sharing information in a way that everybody can understand regardless of their backgrounds, beliefs, origins, disabilities, language spoken, communication preferences or even sexual preferences. In this chapter we discuss some of the differences and how to adopt a more inclusive approach.

Chapter 15: Put it into action

This chapter reviews the key reasons for needing to develop a communication plan. It reminds the reader that an action plan with clear outcomes, milestones and measurable successes is best practice. It then goes through a detailed and structured process to explain to a headteacher how to develop their communication action plan. It describes the main elements to include, where to search for content contributions and includes a series of useful templates.

Chapter 16: Are you succeeding?

It is important to regularly check that communication is working and messages are being well received and feedback is being addressed. There are several ways in which communication effectiveness can be measured that are formal and informal and qualitative and quantitative.

This chapter provides a comprehensive list of ways in which to measure communication effectiveness against the original school vision. The respective strengths and limitations of each method are discussed and templates are included.

Chapter 17: Keep going

Good communication is a habit that requires commitment and regular sense checks along the way to avoid falling back into previous bad habits of poor communication. It requires openness by the headteacher and a clear understanding of the journey by their team.

This chapter describes how to create the habit of good communication within a school. It provides ideas to create sustainable activities and recommendations to ensure that successes are celebrated along the way.

Chapter 18: You're ready to go

This chapter summarises the key messages contained within the rest of the book. It reaffirms that the steps outlined in this book will enable a headteacher to take the communication opportunity within their school. It reminds the reader that the book is a guide and best practice reference manual. Further and on-going support can also be recruited depending on individual requirements.