

Practitioner Corner

Clarity of Communication for Facilitating Change

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Schools are typically highly structured institutions, so any shifts in processes can potentially generate anxiety, confusion, and even anger among staff. As such, when there is frequent change, initiatives often fail to achieve their intended goals. Well-intentioned initiatives can go awry when not consistently implemented correctly by all staff; lack of buy-in due to confusion of how the initiative is necessary also impacts outcomes. Ensuring buy-in and consistent implementation of new initiatives can be even more challenging in virtual school environments. How changes are communicated is crucial to how they are received and to the success of their implementation. A communication intervention was implemented at a 100% independent study personalized learning non-classroom-based remote setting of 2400 students where the staff of over 200 works from home. All departments agreed upon common goals and a common template for rollouts was instituted. Staff reported less confusion and administrators reported less “pushback” over changes as well as vastly reduced misimplementation of initiatives, resulting in improved academic outcomes for students. The determination was made that the more clarity there is in rollouts, the better equipped staff are to support students, and student outcomes are more likely to improve.

Change is rarely easy is an understatement in the field of education. Traditional schools are typically highly structured institutions, so any shifts in processes tend to generate anxiety, confusion, and even anger. As such, when there is frequent change at schools in particular, initiatives often fail to achieve their intended goals (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2020). There are also a variety of potential reactions from staff regarding change: some support it, some pilot it, some roll their eyes and reminisce about all of the previous “changes,” some strongly resist it, and some simply leave. How that change is communicated is crucial to how it is received and to the success of any implementation.

The concepts of shared leadership, grassroots initiatives, and education partners’ buy-in are well known to help hasten in change. Eckert (2019) asserts that collective leadership development impacts student outcomes. In all honesty, there are plenty of videos, articles, and professional learning webinars out there on these topics. However, a simple but crucial piece of each of those is frequently overlooked: clear and consistent communication. Not every staff member hears or repeats messaging the same way, just like not all students learn the same way, so addressing the nuances of transparent communication are vital to the success of any initiative.

Frequent change and resistance to even beneficial shifts were a challenge faced by Compass Charter Schools (Compass). Compass is a district of independent study, personalized learning, public charter schools that serve 18 counties across California. The staff live throughout the state and work virtually. When I first joined the district in a chief level position, I reviewed survey data from questionnaires the Human Resource department recently sent to staff. I immediately noted a large number of comments reflecting dislike for changes, going so far as to make negative comments about personnel who tried to implement changes. Additionally, whenever I suggested a more efficient or improved method of completing tasks, those recommendations were quickly met by protests from staff members who insisted that there was no reason to change any processes, even if the achievement data showed otherwise. I noted that this staff had a high rate of resistance to change, which is the most common reason change is ineffective (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2020). I reviewed the staff survey data again, reading every comment very carefully, as well as paid attention to ratings the staff ascribed to various aspects of the organization. A commonality across scores was lower ratings in the area of communication, with comments detailing that staff felt that they did not know why they were being asked to do various tasks and did not know whom to ask if they had questions about those tasks. Staff comments reflected a shroud of mistrust. Brown, Zhang, Xu, & Corbett (2018) assert that teachers work better in a trusting environment.

From my own experience as a new employee, I could corroborate this, since I observed information constantly being mis-messed, like a childhood game of telephone. Yet these were knowledgeable, dedicated, experienced, hardworking educators. Didn't they want improvements, better outcomes, higher achievement, and more support?

A common theme soon became apparent: there was a lack of transparency regarding the reasons behind changes. As I was tasked with initiatives to roll out, little to no rationale, data, background information, or contact people were provided. I perused examples of emails and documents sent to staff, as well as posts on our intranet. Those, too, reflected the lack of context for the additional work or change of processes being asked of staff. The staff had become almost jaded to new ideas, which all seemed to them like change simply for the sake of change. There appeared to be a need to try every shiny new technology platform or integrate the latest trend (which was usually a recycled, but slightly updated strategy from the past, now under a new name). From their perspective, they were used to everything being turned upside down on a regular basis. But when someone took the time to explain the reasons behind a new process and the data or research supporting the expected outcomes, they appeared more eager to get involved. Additionally, though all staff worked on our organization-wide projects, knew the mission and vision, and were involved in development of annual goals, there was a lack of connection between all of that and what was being requested of them to do. This cycle had to be broken if there was going to be any positive change. We took a proactive approach about this.

First, in addition to our existing graduation rate goal, we developed a goal focused on our staff culture. Our next step was to connect the dots of all of our initiatives and only make changes to them where the data reflected a need. With the help of an outside consulting firm, our "Wildly Important Goals" (WIGs), our Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP), our mission, our vision, our core values, expected scholar (student) outcomes, our strategic plan, expected learning experiences, and enabling conditions were all refined and consolidated into one "Blueprint for Success" infographic that reflected their interconnectedness (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1. Blueprint for Success.

The infographic reflected that our mission was our foundation, and that our values, enabling conditions, and plan stabilized the base. Our “house” was the main focus of what our education partners could see: our goals, strategic plan, and the learning experiences we offer. This all leads to the crowning glory of our scholar outcomes. Finally, these initiatives are all housed under our vision.

The next step was to ensure that this blueprint was properly rolled out and explained. As a medium-sized school district comprising three schools and a central office, with staff in multiple geographical areas, we knew this could be a challenge. Anticipating that different teams (e.g., classified, teachers of various grade levels, etc.) could be receiving slightly different messages, we first trained our administrators in how to message the blueprint, provided suggested highlights to cover, and then buddied the administrators together to deliver the message virtually via live video conferencing to small groups of staff. As a result, the staff heard the same or very similar

messages, yet had the opportunity to ask questions for clarity. Furthermore, with at least two administrators present, any detail that might not have been mentioned by one administrator was then covered by the other. The feedback from staff was overwhelmingly positive.

Moving forward, all of our projects, efforts, and focus were all aligned. The remaining roadblocks we had to overcome were that staff perceived proposed changes as additional work, rather than an extension of our blueprint, and that staff required transparency regarding what was expected of them. We resolved these final issues by using a graphic organizer, dubbed the “Ask and Outcome Template.” If someone was going to ask staff as a group to change a process, do more tasks, or share any type of notable change, they used this template to ensure clarity (see Figure 2 below).

The Ask/Need	The Why (This is how it supports our Blueprint for Success)	Helpful Information (Here are links, data, or other information)	Expected Outcome (Considered complete/successful if [product/action expected] occurs by [date])

Figure 2. Ask and Outcome Template.

Any new rollout in our Academic Services Division used this template and the results were higher rates of meeting deadlines, outcomes meeting expectations, and less confusion regarding whom to ask for clarification or assistance. We considered that staff, just like our scholars, favor various perceptual learning modalities. Gone were the days of “we put the information out there, so why didn’t you get it done.” Taking our staff into account as adult learners, we shared these templates via multiple outlets: we reviewed them verbally during meetings, we sent them out via email, we posted them on our intranet, and they were shared with the cabinet level team. Quickly, instead of grumbling, we heard “thank you.” The concise, clear, and consistent explanation did not generate fear.

While there was improved communication from the administration, a component was still missing: effective peer to peer communication, with an opportunity to create change in what is typically referred to as a “bottom-up” manner. By attributing change to staff members, we could shift planned top-down change to more staff generated solutions (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2020), which reduced resistance to change and potentially increased success rates. Unfortunately, nuances of communication often get lost in emails and

asynchronous shared documents. Therefore, we wanted to ensure that staff had the time and virtual space set aside for staff to collaborate with each other in a meaningful manner to generate the action plans needed for continuous improvement. We were also aware that strategic actions related to communication needed to be taken to ensure equity and non-discrimination in conversations (Lee, Li, & Tsai, 2021). We first had to ensure that clear, compassionate, and equitable communication was the norm, which meant that we had to engage our staff with professional development on this topic. We already tinkered with our scheduling in the past to create a weekly time for meeting and professional development. It was time to take it to the next level, which we did by creating a cadence for the type of collaboration opportunities available. We developed an alternating schedule of facilitated virtual meetings, including team/department meetings, cross-departmental data driven conversation time, open peer collaboration time, and professional learning personal pathway time. Thus, staff had multiple opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions with colleagues across a variety of topics, ranging from data-based ASIT style conversations to ed tech training to peer collaborative lesson and assessment planning, as well as time to focus on their own pathways for professional learning plans. Teacher agency was crucial for successful professional growth (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019), so we are currently nurturing that ownership in our staff. We will continue to tweak the schedule as the year progresses and the needs of our scholars and staff shift.

I know this is working because each department collects data on a weekly or monthly basis related to staff satisfaction and connectedness, with some questions specific to clarity of information and communication. We ensure that everyone knows the “why” behind initiatives, and we track progress in this area on a monthly scoreboard, ensuring alignment between departments and clear communication of expectations. We are also looking into streamlining our data collection methods and our templates to ensure that these new processes are sustainable. We are confident that, since this is being implemented consistently, the need to use all the tools will sharply reduce, especially as mistrust and confusion declines. This process is designed to re-establish trust and support, especially regarding the “why” behind initiatives. Once that has occurred, there will be more implicit understanding, as well as more staff-driven ideas, which will no longer necessitate the use of such a structured process; we will be able to phase out portions of it, as transparency becomes the norm in both daily conversations and in staff meetings.

This will always be a work in progress. There will be new goals. Our strategic plan might be altered. We may gain new staff members or see a shift in our scholar population. As the global landscape changes, so will the

needs of our scholars. Change is inevitable. Change, though, does not have to be a dirty word, and leading during that change should not strike panic in the hearts of school leaders. Though leading through change can be challenging, resistance can certainly be reduced by clarity and transparency of communication. When everyone knows what is expected of them, how it relates to the bigger picture, how to quickly access support, and have time to collaborate, the process can be a painless and rewarding experience.

DECLARATIONS

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