Communication in Schools

Introduction

As an accrediting body, ISACS reads scores of self-study reports and visiting team reports yearly: one theme that seems consistent across schools and over time is the faculty perception that "what we have here is a basic failure to communicate." Our experience with schools, however, seems to contradict the testimony: heads of schools are increasingly making attempts to communicate to any and all constituencies in more frequent and formal ways. Why does this apparent paradox exist?

More specifically, we almost always suspect that "failure to communicate" is a euphemism for some level of faculty malaise or unhappiness. Is this a correct suspicion? Or is it indeed the fact that school heads don't communicate enough or don't communicate effectively enough?

ISACS became very interested in the teacher responses to this conundrum and accordingly used its ISACS Rep listserv and our independent school consultants list as a mechanism to solicit reactions to this dilemma and paradox, promising confidentiality and indicating our willingness to assemble the comments in some coherent fashion. This monograph is that collection of responses, with editorial commentary on our part at the end regarding what the comments reveal and how we should learn from them. Many of the recommendations for head and faculty actions are informed by a panel discussion of the listserv comments at the ISACS 2000 Annual Conference.

Observations on School Communications

- Consultant: In general teachers do not like to change. The current environment is requiring teachers to change the manner and the process used to perform their job. In addition, more is being required of them. This is causing a general problem. It does not seem that we have prepared teachers for change. They do not seem to share the view that change is necessary, and many have no desire to change. Therefore, just like in the business world, employees resist change and authority. Many heads do not seem to understand that to lead requires that they listen and then delegate - not necessarily take action themselves.

Some are micro-managers. Limited decision authority is given to teachers. This tends to lead to mistrust and a general lack of communication. Some teachers do not listen because they know the head will take control of the situation and deal with the particular issue. Consequently, all the teacher needs to do is teach and, therefore, the communication system breaks down. Many heads of schools do not
seem to understand that they must establish very good rapport with teachers during low stress times to build a bond of trust. Many wait until a crisis hits before beginning to build this bond. In addition, many teachers do not believe that the head is supporting their efforts and do not trust the actions of the head. It seems that the communication process in many schools is based on an old paradigm. Often this communication process lacks timeliness, clarity, completeness, appropriateness of level of detail. In addition, too many official modes of communication are used. Should the individual pay attention to email, verbal communications, memos, assemblies, meetings, etc.?

• **Consultant:** Often I visit a new client organization (medical school, vet school, nursing school, independent school, whatever) and we are told by everyone in sight that "morale around here is in the toilet." Pushing a bit deeper, we find "failures to communicate" on all fronts, and generally a long history of what Seligman calls "learned helplessness" engendered in part by leader and organization actions, but also by an unwitting complicity by those being led. These situations are complex challenges that seem to defy easy intervention. My current thinking is that "communication" and "morale" are real enough problems, but are relatively near the surface and thus more like symptoms than root causes. Another hypothesis that I entertain is that the perception of withheld information (failure to communicate) spawns paranoia (what we don't know we make up) and mistrust, leading to a vicious cycle of less communication and more mistrust all the way around. My initial hunch is that the phenomenon you describe is both faculty malaise (low morale) AND failure to communicate by heads (and others).

• **Head of School:** I've continued to think about your point that things have changed, that heads need to be politicians vs. being educational leaders, with all of the implications therein. Definitely I think you're on to something important. These sorts of changes have actually been happening for some time in our schools, I am convinced, but because their nature has been so continual -- an evolution, if you will -- I think we are often far less aware of them than should be the case. Like you, for some time I've been dwelling on the changing relationship between head and faculty. Indeed, personally, I continue to ask myself how I need to "supervise" (note the quotes!) differently -- now that I have been here for so many years and have a superb faculty -- more so than I did when I came and the school was in far more formative stages. The good news is that we have the school and faculty that we wanted; the other news is that it necessitates different working relationships. Teaching in the 21st century will be far more an art than a science, certainly far more so than it has been in the past. The question becomes: what does this mean for how we supervise our "teacher-artists"? Second, I use the metaphor to examine the changing nature of administrative power in the work setting (from Drucker's "knowledge workers" to Senge's
"learning organization" to Helgesen’s "web"). The reality is that hierarchies have flattened, information is pervasive, and that employees working together and learning from one another are essential. This is true in all sorts of organizations, I'm convinced, particularly schools, but no where more so than in independent schools.

- **Science Department Chair:** In response to your question about communication. I really don't see this as a problem at our school: on a daily basis the communication is forthright and always present. However, when important decisions are made that affect us all, sometimes they are swift and final and catch everyone by surprise. I do realize that there is a line between administration and faculty, and that decision making is the job and prerogative of the administration. However, certain decisions need processing and a certain amount of processing. Reaching the balance between empowering the faculty and running the organization is a fine and difficult line for the administration. I am also convinced that there is a group of unhappy teachers for whatever reason that like to complain, and nothing will ever really stop that. Personally, I love my job and although I enjoy weekends, summers, and vacations, I also enjoy Mondays and September. I've decided to spend my life as a teacher and have already spent many years doing this job and it STILL is exciting, new, and challenging!

- **Head of School:** The subject is interesting. Having been a classroom teacher who was obviously vocal and now being a headmaster, I see both sides. I do not think the issue is really one of communication but one of definition. My perception is that it is not really a sign of unhappiness when people check that there are problems with communication. The response is that people do not hear what they want to hear and that they do not think that they are privy to some of the inside information. We live in an age where we all want the "inside track." As headmasters, we have to keep certain information confidential. Other information is really of no relevance to teachers, but teachers think that it is. The same often applies to parents and even trustees. In many ways, it is a sign of our times. As headmasters, I also think that we forget to make our teachers feel important in their positions. Knowledge of information is often perceived as power rather than responsibility. I am not sure that there are any real solutions other than trying to make a first rate effort to communicate as much as possible in a professional and consistent manner.

- **Teacher:** While the head at this school issues frequent informational memos, often the memo is not printed until the issue at question is finalized. In the meantime, people talk and trade their information, be it true or false. People feel communication is slow. The Head is caught between releasing incomplete facts, violating personal confidence, and jumping the gun.
• **Admissions Director:** Listening is an important part of communication. Sometimes this means openly hearing things that you don't want to hear, or perhaps don't even believe. Look closer at the statements made about "a basic failure to communicate." Regardless of all of the efforts to improve communication, like it or not, something is still not working, or this wouldn't continue to be brought up. I wonder if all too often we administrators, who know more of the "whole story," are too quick to stop listening. We understand the confidential nature of much of what we know, we continue to provide our constituents with answers and solutions that we deem appropriate, and we move forward with our own agendas, given the amount of "insider information" or "bigger picture knowledge" that we possess, and that we know they (parents, teachers, board members, etc.) don't possess. The natural perception then is that we "didn't really listen." There must be a better way to balance what truly is confidential with that which should (could) be shared.

• **Teacher:** This age has acquired many names; I have chosen to refer to it as the "Spoon-Feed-Me Age." There's a wonderful dialogue line from the musical *Little Shop of Horrors* where the plant says in a gravely voice, "Feed me, Seymour; feed me now!" I think we are seeing a drop in level of responsibility where too many adults are saying "Spoon feed me, Seymour; spoon feed me now!" It's true that the quantity of information we must digest seems to grow every day. It is not, in my opinion, however, the job of someone else to give us information and then tell us what information they gave us. Life is too short for unnecessary redundancy.

• **Teacher:** In a recent analysis of the administrative structure here, the discussion revealed that the standard in industry for the number of people making direct reports to an executive/administrator is ideally around seven, and hovers around eleven. In schools, here at least, collegiality and the desire for effective communications lead to open door policies, consensus building, shared decision-making, all necessary and required for buy-in by the constituents in whatever the projects are. However, this results in the perception among members of the school community that they have valid reasons for direct communication with the head: teachers with special information; administrators with special information; committee members with special information; ancillary school functions folks with special needs. The numbers quickly become pretty staggering—in effect, direct reports from numbers vastly beyond the parameters found to be effective in industry. I usually bridle at any attempts to shift industry models into schools but there seems to be a wisdom here worth looking at. One dichotomy involves achieving the perception of openness to all voices AND having the tight, invisible, highly effective chain of command necessary to run the complex operation that even the smallest school represents. Another dichotomy is the
fact that the buck stops at the head’s desk, always, sooner rather than later, usually publicly and noisily and yet, the other administrators need to have real responsibility and real decision-making capability.

- **Teacher:** For many people in management (aka. administration) communication in the traditional world means "to talk to someone." It is seen primarily as the transmission of information. It is top-down, and one-way. It projects what Deborah Tannen would call a very male-centered style of talk. It is what teachers do every day: tell people what they think. This is not communication. Communication involves LISTENING as well as talking. And this means active listening, where the listener shuts up, sits quietly, focuses on the other person, reflects back to the other person what was said to them, and does this until the two (or more) people in the conversation have arrived at a mutual agreement that each understands the other. They can agree to disagree. They cannot leave until each understands the other. This takes time. Administrators often don't have time (or feel like they don't). They have many competing demands for their attention. The ones I know also are very flustered when the control slips away from them. This doesn't deny that sometimes there are too many, contentious people in the room who are trying to argue a policy that cannot be changed and the Head must take charge. But, even then, a Head needs to explain that he understands the concern and explain why it is not an input issue. Faculty want input. More importantly, they want to know that their opinion and expertise are valued, heard, and understood. They want follow-up. They want leadership: forward-thinking that trusts them to be part of the process and understands that these are the people in the trenches who have the ability to see the details of what's happening and the ability to sound warnings in advance of the problems. When faculty try to "fix things," and there is no acknowledgement, much less any solution, they shut up. What is the point? They become frustrated, then resentful. Then they gripe that there is no communication. It is a code word. It means, "No one is listening to us and we know a hell of a lot. We are trying to make this school and this world a better place, but our efforts are wasted. I'm tired of wasting my voice." This is why a Head of School needs emotional and political savvy. A Head must be a good listener. He must appear to be approachable and open. He needs to have clear methods of checking in with the faculty as a whole (which can be through key leaders or through a formalized committee process). The Head needs to understand that he doesn't relinquish power by admitting ignorance or confusion, and that the faculty is more than willing to let the Head make the big decisions, and some of the small ones too. To be fair, there is a flip side to this issue. That's the faculty. Some of them don't listen too well, either. They don't read memos, e-mails, posted notices, and they don't remember what they've been told. They don't maintain consistency of approach over time. While this inability to pay attention to messages could be an issue of learning styles, it also smacks of
irresponsibility and lack of professionalism. Is someone going to call them on this?

- **Teacher:** It is my observation that communication failure is not due to infrequent communication but too much information. Too much information also stems from the number of on-going programs and the addition of more programs, meetings, etc., all leading to frustration and yes, faculty malaise and unhappiness.

- **Teacher:** In our organization I believe it is not the lack of communication but the type of communication: E-mail, voice mail, notes. There is minimal personal communication. We also are experiencing what I call "parallel communication." Administrators communicate, teachers communicate but it breaks down because there is no one to link the two parallel avenues of communication. As a result staff are feeling uninformed and undervalued or unsupported.

- **Head of School:** The ISACS accreditation process helped to coalesce my thinking on the issue of change particularly as it is linked to our communication and leadership systems. I was not surprised but slightly amused when you said that all the visiting teams were recommending schools address communication. That was our number three recommendation. I decided to jump right on that and have hired a consultant to work with us on developing a culture print of our organization and then leading us in a process to improve our culture with specific focus on communication issues, especially clarity of decision-making processes and roles and responsibilities. So far, I am finding this experience to be tremendously powerful for the organization. As a first step, we needed to validate our core values. The consultant will use these values to create a survey that measures the degree to which our values are evident/driving our day to day work. The administrative team worked on validating/defining core values for several weeks, then we took it to the staff and board. Already, there has been a significant shift at the administrative level; the board is excited; and I still have work to do to allay staff concerns about where this is all leading which ties back to the whole notion of creating a change ready organization. The staff response also fits in with some of the faculty issues you identified. I agree that faculty want security but how security is defined is key. For at least some of my faculty, I feel certain their definition of security is that the organization maintains the status quo.

- **Teacher:** I think sometimes teachers don't read communications or attend meetings where the information is being communicated. I know many teachers who delete emails from certain administrators because they are lengthy or the teacher doesn't feel that the type of information usually sent applies to them. I also know of teachers who skip community meetings
because they feel they are a waste of time. These teachers often complain of not having received any information. I know that I myself receive so much information that I often save it for another day and then never get to it. I know our head tries to communicate, but he also is dealing with so many issues that he forgets to pass some things on.

**Method:**

ISACS convened a panel at its Annual Conference in Chicago on November 3, 2000, comprised of two sitting heads, Barbara Groves of Louisville Collegiate School and Patricia Hayot of the Columbus School for Girls, two faculty members, Sarah Moran of Louisville Collegiate School and Martha Shaw of the Columbus School for Girls, along with ISACS President Patrick Bassett and moderator/discussant Marc Frankel, also a trustee at The Wilson School (Missouri) and a consultant to independent education. Panelists reacted to the listserv comments, and, along with the more than fifty people attending the session, helped formulate a set of strategies for improving communication in schools. The work products of this session help inform the analysis and recommendations that follow.

**Three Views of the Problem**

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<th>Heads’ View</th>
<th>&quot;We don't have a communications problem; we have a reading problem.&quot;</th>
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<td>Faculty View</td>
<td>&quot;We don't need more talk; we need more listening.&quot; To wit, from faculty of color: &quot;We feel overburdened (e.g., as torch carrier for cultural assimilation/preservation); unsupported (unaffirmed); identified as the problem not the messenger; dismissed (‘over-sensitive’). We see defensiveness &amp; denial.&quot;</td>
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<td>ISACS’ View</td>
<td>Complicated dynamic with complex dimensions (systemic limitations on communications; benign neglect; life stage issues). What heads want is efficient communications and compliance; what faculty needs are intimate relationships, trust, reassurance (security).</td>
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**Analysis:**

Independent schools succeed academically by liberating themselves from the constraints of public school curricula and rigmarole, and by creating an environment where nearly every child can involve him or herself in extra-curricular activities. Sad, then, that we recreate by mismanagement some of the same fault lines that divide groups such as faculty and administration—and pose substantial impediments to innovation—in the public districts.

Two notions emerge from the listserv comments above to inform our discussion about communication issues in schools:
• Information overload is a characteristic of post-modern life, with the result that it is increasingly difficult to discern the significant from the extraneous; and
• Neither heads nor faculty feel appropriately appreciated by others, and, in some cases, may project their own sense of victimization in one sphere of life (e.g., achievement issues, or economic and occupational status) onto the other party.

Regardless of whether one views "failure to communicate" as real or euphemistic, successful resolution of the problem must take into account these two factors. Simply doing more of the same things (e.g., increasing the same kinds of communication), a frequent human response to challenge, only adds to deluge of information. Likewise, if the problem has more to do with understanding and appreciation than with awareness of facts, then stepping up the volume of communication would only seem to reify that problem.

Today, much is fluid about leadership, followership, and the culture of our schools. The prevailing view of leadership is changing, in the same way that pedagogy has changed from "sage on a stage" to "guide at their side." Faculty, parents, and others, reflecting a panoply of democratizing influences in our society, now expect a greater voice in administrative decisions and policy. Recognition of this by heads and other administrators sets the stage for greater openness about day-to-day operations and long term strategy alike, and would signal the end for a model of headship that has changed little since its inception by Thomas Arnold at England’s Rugby School in the 1830’s. In fact, one way of thinking about the head’s emerging role is as "Chief Facilitating Officer for Information Exchange." In this way, the head and other senior administrators would have primary roles as facilitators of a continuous conversation among the various constituents to the school.

The risks and rewards to organizations of openness are illustrated by recent cases of crisis management run amuck and done well by highly visible corporations. In the 1980’s, Johnson and Johnson created the case study benchmark for crisis management with its handling of the Tylenol product contamination issue. Highly visible leadership and wide-open communication allowed the company to quickly rebuild customer trust in the Tylenol brand. On the other hand, the invisibility and carefully-worded legalese employed by TWA leaders in the days following the crash of Flight 800 in 1996 set the standard for how not to manage a crisis, especially one not of the organization’s own making. No wonder that virtually every model of effective change and crisis management incorporates mechanisms to ensure rapid and open two-way communication between the organization and its constituents.

The other side of the shifting paradigms notion requires that faculty simultaneously cut their administrators more slack and take the self-accountable initiative to begin bridging gaps in communication. To a frightening extent, we find schools rife with
we/they thinking and language, often straddling the all-too-easy divides inherent in our schools: parents/faculty, faculty/administration, on-campus resident faculty/off-campus commuter faculty, etc. Imagine what the conversations would sound like if there were no we or they—only us.

So, like Pogo, both administrators and faculty need to face the fact that they are their own worst enemy. Heads who isolate, or, even more tragically, communicate in an arrogant, condescending, and demeaning manner, will continue to have faculty who grumble about "failure to communicate." At the same time, closet murmuring by faculty is unprofessional and destructive to the formation and maintenance of school community. At their worst, these two factors combine to form two sides of a vicious circle joining heads and their faculties in a deadly dance wherein each blames the other and neither seems motivated to change.

Mutual respect begins with an appreciation for the value that each group adds to the school. We challenge heads (and other administrators) to understand, appreciate, and value how their faculties literally create a microclimate in their classrooms where the essential work of education gets done. Likewise, faculty must set aside preconceived notions to appreciate the ways in which heads put a human face on the school and help conjure into existence the larger sense of community. Most importantly, each side must know that the other understands and appreciates these things.

Summary and Suggestions:

The listserv comments compellingly make the case that "failure to communicate" is a complex issue with multiple causes and just as many possible resolutions. In short, it seems clear that problems in communication within schools may be either real or symptomatic, but they require careful study and analysis before rendering a diagnosis or prescribing actions on the part of either the head or faculty. A one-size-fits-all approach to rectifying the communication issue runs a more than substantial risk of missing the mark. And therein lies a paradox: If a failure to communicate exists, then how can a head be sufficiently in tune with his or her school and faculty so as to render an accurate diagnosis?

Nonetheless, we believe several themes emerge from the listserv dialog (and from our own experience with schools) that might usefully guide heads and faculty toward identifying problems and formulating solutions.

- Individual differences in learning styles demand a multi-modal (e.g., didactic, discursive, ink-and-paper, electronic text, etc.) approach to conveying information. Administrators must never presume that a majority has absorbed some information just because something appears in a newsletter or on a
Website. It is vital to go out of one’s way to repeat important messages in as many media as possible.

- Make communication meaningful (value-laden, related to core ideas and mission), simplified, highlighted and embodied within school stories.

- Neither heads nor faculty should make the assumption that the other understands its viewpoint in the absence of mechanisms to assure such understanding.
- Boards of trustees and heads must continuously clarify the distinction between faculty "having a voice" and "having their way"; for example, leadership should define "what’s on the table" and "what’s not."

- Leadership should define up front and give rationale for major decisions that will not be "inclusive" nor "consensus-based": e.g., "I’ve asked three faculty members to experiment with a new idea or approach—before we get to the debate stage on whether or not we should all move in this new direction...."

- Followership should tolerate a greater degree of ambiguity and occasional timing miscues, and should "cut some slack" for harried administrators.

- Faculty should attend carefully and consistently to the various ways information is exchanged within the school, asking questions to reduce ambiguity and avoiding the replacement of knowing with the creation of rumors.
- Expect miscommunication and develop mechanisms for detecting rumors and clarifying misunderstandings.

- Heads and faculty alike must learn the communication skills necessary to ensure clarity and mutual understanding.

- Boards and heads should consider the possibilities of "open-book management": that is, a nearly complete sharing of operating data and critical information with faculty and other stakeholders.
- Avoid top-down communication in situations where mutual respect would suggest that a true bi-directional dialog would be more appropriate (e.g., less stump speech from head, more transparent and solicitous).
- Share not only what is happening in the school, but also the thinking and rationale that lead to decisions being made in particular ways.

Finally, it is crucial that people in positions of school leadership take seriously their need to communicate. The challenges our schools face at the dawn of the 21st Century are formidable, and their resolution requires the constructive engagement of every stakeholder group. "Failures to communicate," whatever their origins, are
an avoidable toxin affecting schools’ capacities for change, advancement, and a thriving future.

Authors: Patrick F. Bassett, President of the Independent Schools Association of the Central States (ISACS), and Marc T. Frankel, Ph.D., Principal Consultant at Triangle Associates of St. Louis. ISACS Update, Fall 2000.