EDC/HRE FOR PRINCIPALS

Awareness
Of what and why?

Preparation
Fostering transparency

Action
Clear and precise

COMMUNICATION

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Communication and democracy

In our modern world it is widely agreed that communication is the key to a vibrant, well-functioning community. Effective channels of communication can support and enhance mutual understanding, equality and the respect for human and democratic values.

Within the school community, school principals play a key role in that regard. Therefore, they should be cognizant of the first so-called axiom by Paul Watzlawick which holds that “One cannot not communicate.” Whatever principals do is always understood and interpreted by those around them as a message, whether articulated or not. Even if a principal were to avoid sending a message e.g., by remaining silent in a meeting, it would be subject to interpretation by others. Facial expressions, gestures and body language will also be understood and analyzed as acts of communication. As a school principal, you are responsible for an institution in which democratic values and forms of participation can be taught and practised. The way you communicate and transmit verbal or non-verbal messages makes a difference. Effective communication can make learning easier, help students achieve goals and increase opportunities for expanded learning. It strengthens the connection between students and teachers and creates an overall positive experience. People want to be heard. If an adult shows interest in students’ opinions, the students will feel that their thoughts and ideas are appreciated. This increases their self-esteem and confidence. A confident student is more likely to speak up in class, and broader student participation in class will improve learning and positively affect interaction within the entire group, and the school as a whole.

The focus of this sequence

Leadership in a democratic school community, just like teaching, consists to a considerable extent of communication. Thus, the principal’s mode of communication is of crucial importance to all. The principal’s communicative behavior can enhance or obstruct transparency in school affairs. Transparent leadership is the precondition for the school community’s ability to identify with their school, share responsibility and participate in institutional decision-making.
This sequence focuses on the school principal’s communication in formal contexts, e.g. when holding a staff meeting, or editing and distributing a school newsletter to stakeholders within and outside of the school community. It does not address how to deal with the communication process as a whole, or the communicative behavior of teachers, students, parents or other stakeholders, nor consider informal every-day situations of communication in school, e.g. in the corridor or during breaks – as important as they may be.

By limiting the scope and complexity of the sequence, we intend to make it as user-friendly and efficient as possible. In what follows, we consider the possibilities and tools within your reach that support you, the principal, to meet your position’s formal professional requirements when communicating with the school community and external stakeholders. Through your articulations and choice of modes and channels of communication, you can serve as a model for your students and enhance their learning and experiencing democracy in school life.

**Competences**

The objective of this sequence is to further those competences that support your professional performance as principal and to help transform your school into a democratic community. The Council of Europe has described these competences in Competences for democratic culture (2016) (more [https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/competences-for-democratic-culture](https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/competences-for-democratic-culture). Downloads are available in several European languages). Modern democracy not only depends on an institutional framework, e.g. laws about holding elections, but equally on the values and attitudes shared by the citizens and members of the community, and their skills, e.g. in communicating and interacting with each other, and their knowledge and understanding of their roles. Through your communicative behavior as school principal, you can provide the students in your school with the opportunity to learn competences that are vital for democracy in your country to thrive and develop.

**The attitude of respect (pp.12, 39 f.)**

The Council of Europe’s competence model includes the attitude of respect, defining it as the recognition of “intrinsic dignity and equality of all human beings” and their specific ways of behaviour, needs and interests. Respect is more than tolerance, which basically means putting up with everything. Respect allows a person to maintain a critical distance, and ends when you encounter people who, for example advocate violence, racism or sexism and thereby deny respect to others. An attitude of respect is essential for a democratic community at the school or national level; it facilitates open and democratic interaction with other people and is the precondition for constructive communication in school. By showing respect to every member of the school community, you set an example for your students and staff members.

**Communicative skills (pp. 14, 48 f.)**

The purpose of this sequence is to practise your communicative skills. In the words of the competence model, “the ability to communicate clearly in a range of situations – this includes expressing one’s beliefs, opinions, interests and needs, explaining an clarifying ideas, advocating, promoting, arguing, reasoning, discussing, debating, persuading and negotiating (…) the ability to express oneself confidently and without aggression (…) and to express (…) disagreement with another person in a manner that is respectful of that person’s dignity and rights”.

It seems obvious that communicative skills not only enhance your professional performance as a school principal, but also enable the students and staff to participate in a democratic school community.

**Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication (pp.14, 51 f.)**

Besides being able to communicate more effectively, it is important to be aware of why and for what purpose we choose a certain style, mode or channel. We may then understand “the social impact and effects on others of different communication styles”, and how they can encourage openness, the willingness to co-operate, and help settle, rather than intensify conflicts.
The most important element of communication in a democratic context is transparency, particularly in formal communication. Modern democracy requires both accountability and transparency. Thus, communication processes that permanently exclude certain members or groups of the school community are simply undemocratic.

Whether you are preparing for a school board meeting, writing a press release about a school event, asking for an opportunity to speak with parents about a concern or trying to get some clarifications about newly adopted legislation, there are always multiple ways of communicating with a variety of audiences related to your school. As principal, you determine how much transparency in your institutional communication is adequate and whether it supports a participatory approach in your school, or whether it strengthens the power of a few.

In this section you will be informed about some basic ways to approach the skills of communicating with the school community, always keeping in mind that your school is a micro society.

**The importance of communication with the school community and stakeholders**

By communication, in this context, we refer to the need of sending messages and information to specific audiences. Therefore, as a school principal you need to carefully consider both the solid “construction” of your messages as well as the specific target audiences and the channels of communication you are going to use. It is important to realize that there are different kinds of messages, addressing different kinds of audiences through different kinds of communication channels.

If you have an oral conversation with your staff about an everyday issue, for example, you will re-arrange the classroom to send a non-verbal signal that a special event will take place, whereas you would write a press release to announce an important achievement of the students to the public.

Thus, verbal, non-verbal and written communication is used to get messages across. However the need to formulate a clear and coherent message which all audiences can understand and decode should always be your top priority.

Developing communication skills is critically important in education. Principals, educators and administrators communicate constantly with students, parents, co-workers, institutions, unions, associations, community leaders, and other stakeholders. While it is vital to focus on everyday administrative problems or curriculum development, assessments, or student safety, schools could also benefit from focusing on how well their principals and educators communicate.

Communication is a complicated process with no single, nor simple answers. Thus, as you strive to establish more effective communication processes within the school environment, you can be confident that your actions and statements are not just heard by few, but also fully understood by the people or institutions with whom you are communicating effectively.
**Communication**

**Forms of communication**

- Verbal
  - Parents
  - 1 to 1
  - Board
  - Team
  - Staff
  - Meetings
  - Skype
  - Phone calls
  - Agenda minutes
  - Press releases
  - Letters
  - Emails
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - Website
  - SMS/WhatsApp

- Non-verbal
  - What does my voice convey? (pitch, volume, tone)
  - What do my eyes see and select?
  - What does my body say?
  - What does my facial expression convey?

**My communication as a principal in a democratic school**

**What is my communication profile?**
- What do I HATE MOST?
- What do I LIKE MOST?
- What do I USE MORE?
Audiences of my communication

With whom do I most like to communicate?
With whom do I forget to communicate?
Which groups or persons do I avoid in my communication?
My communication profile

Date of analysis: [ ] / [ ] / [ ]

- My voice
- My body
- My face
- Meetings
- Skype
- Phone calls
- Letters
- Emails
- SMS
- WhatsApp
- Agenda minutes

My short comments

[Blank lines for comments]
Thinking about a newsletter

Pro:
Your information is customized. You control what your newsletter will look like, but you can also customize its content, appearance and release so that it only relates certain kinds of information to specific groups. Your staff, your board, the parents, all of them.

Con:
Too many e-mails. People are inundated with e-mails from everyone and everywhere. It's easy to overlook a couple of e-mail items without high priority, especially if the recipient has a lot of them. Unfortunately, your e-Newsletter might be one of those emails that is overlooked.

If you decide to go ahead, find out how parents and the local community wish to receive news about the school and its events. Offer a range of options.

School community newsletters should provide the means to inform, promote, gather solutions and ideas, and educate. Decide on how you want the balance of these four tasks in each newsletter.

To ensure your intended audience reads your news, it is best to be brief, stick to the point, and customize the message. Take into account the amount of information people must deal with today.

• People have become very discerning information consumers.
• Ensure the newsletter provides the means to convey important messages about your school’s vision, values, strategies and plans.
• Align the messages with your key leadership activities: leading change, leading learning and problem solving.
• Establish and stick to a regular publication timetable.
• Use a template for easy preparation of each edition.
• Enlist others as reporters, such as student volunteers and staff.
• Quality is important, but you need to stick to the budget. Establish the highest standards for accuracy of detail and grammar. Keep in mind that in your communication, you act as a role model. Have a neutral proof reader.
• Make sure the school has parental permission to use any photos of students included.
• Set aside and devote a specific to do your part of the newsletter, preferably several days before the publication due date.
• Ensure that digital newsletters are easy to read online or to download and open.
• Remember that you bear the overall responsibility for your newsletters. You must have the final say on what is included and how it is written.
How to write a news text

In order to create and disseminate an effective press release, it is important to capture the intended recipients’ interests, and that the message be as easy and enjoyable to read as possible. If you adjust the message to capture the interests of its target readers, you do a lot of things right.

Important things first
Before an article, sent to a newspaper is published, it may be edited for excessive wording, and certain information may be pared down, particularly toward the end of a text. Therefore, writing a media release requires a deductive approach, such that the important information is stated at the beginning. This procedure is known as the “inverted pyramid”. The lead is at the heart of the message: it should be succinct while still addressing the six W questions (who, what, why, how, when, where).

Longer texts with subtitles
Media releases succeed if they follow journalistic practices. These include, for example, subtitles in the scrolling text. In order to adapt to journalistic practice, one writes press texts objectively and in the third person. Self-praise, superlatives or advertising should be omitted.

Show the value of the news
The purpose of the media is to inform their audience of something new. Thus, refrain from overwhelming the media with a flood of messages, but provide specific information if you really have something to say. Write clearly, avoid foreign words and terminology if possible. Impress with facts. Add surprising thoughts.

Introduce the school briefly
Location, size, special profile

Indicate a contact person
First name, last name
Function
Address
Phone
e-mail
website
My news text - Checklist for myself:

- Is my text **clear** and comprehensive?

- Is my news text **unique**, informative and relevant to my audience (which audience)?

- Do I position myself as a **leading source** (by sharing my personal views on a currently relevant news event)?

- Do I show the **relevance** of the topic – now and in the future?

- Did I use **quotations** by people who were involved in the event?
Openness and transparency are key requirements for building accountability and trust, which are necessary for the functioning of democratic institutions.

Now: do you want your school to be an example of such a democratic institution?

One obvious way is to make your meetings transparent with enhanced accountability for your decisions. Preparing a public agenda and writing and publishing the minutes (on your website?) are key elements. You can begin with the process or improve it right away.

Make sure to everybody that this is ONE WAY to make your school more democratic. However, you still have to justify decisions you take in a meeting. Being transparent does not mean that everybody has a say in every decision. There are tasks that were entrusted to you as head of the school. Just be clear and transparent about your decisions, especially in meetings. That’s why a (good) agenda has an important role to play!

**Five Elements for a good agenda:**

1. Create your meeting agenda 3 days in advance and forward it through email. Distribute a printed version, or display one in the staff room. Make sure that everyone knows what to expect.
2. Start with the simple details: What time should the meeting start? When will it end? Who should attend?
3. Are the meeting objectives clear to you? Before you start writing an agenda, what is your goal for this meeting? Then prioritize the list to ensure that the most important goals get accomplished.
4. Time per topic: Let the content define how long the discussion of each topic should take.
5. Keep the agenda to less than 5 topics. No one wants to spend two hours in a meeting.

Decide who will take the minutes and prepare this with the respective person. You might decide to rotate the task so that every staff person takes his/her turn in recording the minutes.

**Pre-planning of the meeting minutes:**

- Date and time of the meeting
- Names of the meeting participants and those unable to attend
- Acceptance or corrections/amendments to previous meeting minutes
- Decisions made about each agenda item, for example:
  - Actions taken or agreed to be taken
  - Next steps
  - Voting outcomes
- Next meeting date and time
- Exact moment and place when and where the minutes will be published for the attendees.
Once the meeting is over, organize the notes and write the minutes. Here are some tips that might help the recorder. Share it with him/her and get feedback, if these simple tips help.

Tips for the recorder of a meeting

- Be aware: YOUR MINUTES provide transparency and therefore important elements of democracy in your school! Be proud of it! And use your power in a responsible way.
- Try to write the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting.
- Review your outline and, if necessary, create additional notes or clarify issues raised.
- Edit to ensure clarity, so the minutes are easy to read.
- Write in the same tense throughout.
- Avoid using the participants’ names except for motions.
- Avoid personal comments.
- If you need to refer to other documents, attach them in an appendix or indicate where they may be found. Don’t rewrite or summarize them.

Distributing or sharing meeting minutes

As the head of a school, you want the minutes to be transparent and easy to work with. It is your role to disseminate them. A closed section on the school website is a good place. It gives access, it is well stored, and you don’t use too much paper. The method of sharing or distribution will depend on the tools that you and your school use. For example, if you use a word processing tool that does not offer online sharing, you might want to create a PDF of the document and send this and the other attachments or documents via email. However, before you share these, be sure that they are reviewed and either revised and/or approved for circulation.
E-Democracy, also known as digital democracy or Internet democracy, incorporates 21st-century information and communications technology to promote democracy.

Although the design of your school’s website might be a work of a specialist, as a principal you still have the final word, as well as the responsibility, regarding the content, the updating, the security and the effectiveness of its usability. YOU set the goal for your school website as your most important institutional online tool. It is your central point of online information and the ideal space to promote your school’s news and achievements. It is your tool to promote internal and external transparency. It is an element of YOUR understanding of democracy.

Having a check list will ensure that you don’t overlook any important elements of your schools’ online communication:

**School contact details**
Your school’s website must include:
• your school’s name
• your school’s postal address
• your school’s telephone and fax number(s)
• your school’s email address
• the name of the person(s) responsible to deal with queries from the parents and the public

**Admission arrangements**
You could provide information on:
• when and how you will consider applications for every age group
• what parents should do if they want to apply for their child to attend your school

If the local authority is responsible for your admissions, write that parents should contact the local authority directly to find out more information about your admission arrangements.

**Special educational needs and disability information**
You should include information on any special admission arrangements, access facilities and specialized faculty

**Values and ethos statement**
Your website should include a mission statement with your school’s ethos and values.

**News**
Contents may include:
• Announcements
• Press releases: briefings and statements
• Multimedia: Images, video, audio clips
• Opinion pieces

**Students’ space**
Contents may include:
• Students’ online newspaper
• Space for presenting students’ group projects
• Online educational resources and links for students’ curricula
• Collaboration with other schools, contests, visits
Useful tips:

• Check your website’s compatibility with mobile devices.
• Proofread your texts. Check frequently for spelling mistakes.
• Ensure parental consent for all visual material.
• Regularly update the information.
Communication

How to prepare your school website

A Website means visibility!
A Website takes time to build and to maintain.
A Website fosters transparency.
If you decide: do it!

• Build a team:
   Students, teachers, parents, boards members, professional friends: A team needs to fulfil two tasks: integrate all stakeholders AND CREATE a good website.

• Make the team work:
   When do you want to be ready? Why? What should the website look like (see handout: The ABC of a School Website). It might be advisable to coordinate the launching moment of the website with a special moment in the school year.

• Let the team make the technical decisions. Here is the main hint: Choose WordPress.

   1. **WordPress is totally free, with many layouts/themes to choose from.** WordPress doesn’t cost anything to download or install, and there’s a huge community who has already designed templates, thus making it easy to start fast.

   2. **WordPress is beginner-friendly.** If you know how to use Microsoft Word, you already know how to add your own content. WordPress can be expanded with free plugins to handle just about any site you can imagine. With “plugins” you will be able to add contact forms, subscription forms, image galleries, etc. for your website.

   3. **Your site will be ‘responsive’, which means it will work on mobiles & tablets, too.** The website you build will instantly be responsive and look great on every mobile device, smartphone and tablet. There is no need to hire a web developer for that.

   4. **There is a good support and developer community available to help.** With so many people using the platform, it’s easy to find quick help when you need it. In addition, WordPress has lots of free resources both available on Youtube and their support forum.
### Template for agenda

**Meeting minutes – Clear, easy to understand, transparent.**

| School/school unit: |  |
| Meeting purpose: |  |
| Meeting date: |  |
| Meeting time: |  |
| Meeting location: |  |
| Meeting facilitator: |  |
| Attendees/absentees: |  |
| Minutes recorded by: |  |

### Template for minutes of the meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Next steps</th>
<th>Assigned to</th>
<th>Due date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Meeting agenda

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  

### Decisions made

1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  

### Discussion

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  

### Left overs: (postponed until the next meeting)

-  
-  
-  
-  
-  
**GOOD COMMUNICATION 7 DAYS A WEEK**

**MONDAY**
“I AM HONEST”
Say what you mean and mean what you say.

**TUESDAY**
“I TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MY COMMUNICATION”
Communication is a two way process.

**WEDNESDAY**
“I DON’T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS”
Let go of the past – every discussion is a start.

**THURSDAY**
“I ASK THE OTHER”
Questions give the other the opportunity to be clear to you.

**FRIDAY**
“I QUESTION THE ISSUE, NOT THE PERSON”
Agree on the triangle: the other person – the issue – you.

**SATURDAY**
“I AM NOT ALWAYS RIGHT”
I am willing to admit when I made a mistake.

**SUNDAY**
“I AVOID MAKING OTHERS FEEL WRONG”
A person who feels accused will be defensive and uncommunicative.

“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.” Epictetus
COMMUNICATION HAS MANY ELEMENTS.
HOW TO WRITE A GOOD NEWS ARTICLE

Most important info:

What
Who
Where
When
Why

TEXT

From whom

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