To accomplish all of these expectations, principals must possess outstanding communication skills. Strong communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, are important components of effective leadership. These skills are often described as soft skills. But in leadership, the soft skills are often the hard skills to learn and demonstrate. These soft skills include, but are not limited to, the ability to demonstrate:

- Positive regard
- Active listening
- Empathic understanding
- Meaningful questioning
- Respectful assertiveness
- Constructive confrontation
- Effective feedback
- Willingness to accept criticism

While these aspects of effective communication are important, I encourage principals not to underestimate the importance of non-verbal communication. All leaders should take steps to obtain feedback from a trusted colleague on their non-verbal styles and to understand how these styles affect the people they lead. The old saying “your actions speak so loudly I can hardly hear what you are saying” is a message that principals should bear in mind.

As a young administrator, my strategy was to select a few people whose opinions I trusted and valued and to ask them for feedback on all aspects of my behaviour. This required the ability to listen without interrupting or without the “Yes, but…” that often demonstrates an unwillingness to accept criticism. Accepting criticism without defensiveness is an important interpersonal skill.

I remember being told that my resting face made me appear to be angry. I was frankly not aware of this. I went home and tried to observe my resting face in the mirror. I was not happy with what I saw. I have never forgotten that feedback and how it contributed to my personal growth and self-awareness.

Good communication also equals good public relations. The two are inextricably linked.

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One of my colleagues, Dr. Jim Watt, had a background in both marketing and education. He stressed the point that the public has a right to know as a fundamental premise of good public relations. For him, public relations is not the same as parent relations, nor is it about dispensing information or simply dealing in positives. He emphasized that it is not merely publicity, nor propaganda, nor the generation of a cosmetic effect. Instead, public relations involve three things – the ability to create and foster: dialogue; access; and involvement.

As educational leaders, you are strategically positioned to shape the direction of education and of society as a whole. You are a powerful influence in the lives of students, equipping them with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, sensibilities and character attributes necessary for responsible and engaged citizenship. You are responsible for creating safe havens, caring and demanding learning cultures, and effective schools that emphasize both excellence and equity. You create the conditions for success in teaching, learning and student achievement, and you engage parents and communities in meaningful ways to support learning. With all that you make happen in your schools, you also serve as leaders in your communities.
The notion that dialogue is an essential component of communication is important for school leaders. It suggests that communication is more than the usual two-way communication; in school systems it is multi-pronged and multi-faceted. It has many layers. It is not simply about issuing edicts and directives. The notion of access suggests that effective principals make themselves accessible to the people they serve. It does not take long to determine whether or not a principal is accessible when one visits a school. For example, my colleague Dr. Watt would be in his school every Wednesday evening until at least 9 p.m. for the sole purpose of making himself more accessible. With that knowledge, community members would drop in to see him if they had a question or concern. In addition to regular appointments, which individuals could make at any time, he practiced what he preached about dialogue, access and involvement.

We know that successful principals work assiduously at fostering outreach and engagement with their diverse communities and encourage involvement in the life of the school. Within our diverse contexts, principals can lead with confidence when they develop good relations with these communities and are able to call on members to assist them with resolving issues that confront them. Human rights are very important in Canadian society. Today’s principals communicate in many languages with their communities. They have access to the opinion leaders to whom they can refer questions about the tenets of a particular religion, for example. As a superintendent, I dealt with a situation in which a student had announced emphatically that a requirement was “against my religion.” The principal was hesitant to confront the issue because of the implication of not being sensitive to religious beliefs. But principals who engage and communicate regularly with their diverse populations develop confidence in dealing with sensitive issues. This happens, not because they have all the information at hand, but because they have established clear lines of communication and they have made in-roads into the communities. They can call on community leaders to assist with the school’s understanding of the issues under discussion.

An effective principal communicates with parents in many ways, the most effective of which is face-to-face communication. This is essential not only when conflicts arise but on a regular basis. Parents expect timely communication, especially about the progress of children. They want to know about the first signs of attendance problems or lack of improvement.
When I was a secondary vice-principal, I worked with a teacher who every night took home the phone numbers of three students with the intention of calling their parents and giving them a progress report. Quite often, it was good news: “Pradesh is improving in math” or “Charlene is doing very well this term.” This teacher was a consummate communicator who became legendary in his ability to keep parents informed about their children’s progress in school.

Parents and students should know, in a timely manner, about what they are learning, how they are doing and what it takes to get them to the next level. I have been most impressed with schools in which students are able to articulate their learning goals, how they are doing and what they need to do next. Their teachers have invariably provided them with precise and timely feedback – an essential component of the work of researchers such as John Hattie (2012) on visible learning. His findings of what works in improving student achievement and their relative effect should become a part of every principal’s repertoire.

In an effort to communicate effectively, one size does not fit all circumstances. It is important for principals to reflect on the key reasons for communicating and the most effective ways to communicate their messages. Is it designed to inform, to disseminate information, to solicit input or feedback, to make requests or to rally a group towards a desired goal? Is it a call to action or is it simply to keep parents and guardians informed about a student’s progress? Is it to inform the community about the state of their education system, or is it to provide a report card to the public on the achievement of stated goals and priorities?

Some school districts have Communications Officers. These individuals, many of whom have specialized training, are an excellent resource. They can help prevent or minimize the impact of what can result when we do not have training in public and media relations or when we are not aware of the pitfalls that may arise from insufficient or inadequate communication.

School districts should offer awareness training in public and media relations for current and future leaders. Aspiring or new principals are encouraged to make a habit of soliciting input from Communication Officers who have a background in communications and public relations. It is wise to seek out their advice in the early stages of planning and to confer with them regularly as a situation, project or initiative evolves. They can help prevent the need for the damage control, which often results when communication goes awry.

There are experienced colleagues and supervisors in all school districts who can provide the coaching and support necessary to resolve communication conflicts successfully. Handling these situations requires an openness to learn with and from your colleagues who have dealt with similar situations and have spent time reflecting on their problem resolution processes in light of the communications protocols that exist within school districts. Principals who have developed support networks and who believe in teamwork and collaboration will always find solutions to address the challenges that inevitably arise.

**DID YOU SEE IT?**

The College of Early Childhood Educators sent a poster and important professional updates to elementary schools across Ontario before the start of the school year.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT COLLEGE-ECE.CA/RESOURCES.**

Dr. Avis Glaze is a distinguished Canadian educator who has been recognized internationally for her contributions to education. She is the Former Chief Student Achievement Officer of Ontario and Founding CEO of the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. Avis has worked with school districts in more than 40 countries and states. Recently, she was presented with the Robert Owen Award, the first of its kind, offered by Scotland.

References:

