

The Simple 15/5 Tool

“Good Management Begins with Good People”

by Dennis Vicars

In the highly acclaimed 1967 movie “Cool Hand Luke,” the hard-nosed warden called Captain issues the often repeated line, “What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate,” to his rebellious prisoner, Luke, played by Paul Newman. In truth, there really was not a problem with communication between Captain and Luke; there was just an enormous difference in opinion on whose communication or will would triumph.

Too often we observe these power struggles in our schools. Frequently it is because communication from the Director has been irregular, absent, inconsistent, or unclear in the information or expectation. Consider this: research demonstrates that the average person must hear a radio commercial seven times before he even begins to pay attention to the message. I believe the same probably holds true for viewing the written word. Case in point:



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I witnessed a parent move an easel aside in a lobby only to go to the Assistant Director and ask when a certain event would take place, when the information was displayed on the easel. True story!

What is more concerning than unclear, inconsistent, or lacking communication from leadership is the failure to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding and sharing. A school’s culture is defined by the way its personnel feel about being heard and ‘knowing what’s going on.’ Unless we create an environment where people feel like they are heard and involved in the school’s direction, they will make up their own story.

You have probably heard the adage that communication is a 50/50 proposition. That idea is incorrect, especially when one of the parties has power over the other. We need to base our communication on an understanding that both parties are committed to being clear, exacting, and honest. There is nothing more exhausting and time consuming than dealing with someone who beats around the bush for fear of offending or only hints at what he really wants and then gets angry because you could not deliver on his confusing request.

Unfortunately, the power differential between two people of differing positions, such as a teacher and Director, by its very nature stands in the way of solid two-way communication; therefore it behooves any leader to create an environment where trust will eventually win out and true communication can prevail. Power struggles and conversations in secret seldom exist when all staff believe they are listened to in a meaningful way and are given the opportunity to participate openly without fear of retribution or penalty. Everyone is more willing to listen when they know they have been listened to and respected.

One tool that I have found to be remarkably successful is the 15/5. It is a simple instrument that is filled out at the end of the day on Friday afternoon; I use it to keep in touch with my staff. It takes 15 minutes to think about and 5 minutes to fill out. There are 5 questions that I ask my team to respond to before leaving for the weekend:

- What were your successes for the week?
- What were your challenges this week?
- What are your upcoming challenges?

- What can **we** do to be a better school?
- What can I/we do to help you?

Over the years, I have found this one-page, 5-question exercise to be extremely important in ways I had never dreamed of when I first created it. First, this simple device creates a weekly forum for open discussion. I have found that people are often more open and honest with pen and paper than looking at you eye to eye. In fact, they will often tell you more than they intended. Second, even though the feedback on one week might not tell you the full story of what's happening in your program, over a period of weeks or months, you can identify trends and proactive measures you can take before issues become problems. Third, you now have both the opportunity to assist your staff with their challenges and direct the appropriate resources to ensuring their success. This process builds their trust and faith in you as a leader. Based on their input, you take action or at least take the time to explain why or why not.

Last, and probably more important than the previous three attributes of the 15/5, is the fact that with this instrument staff are offered the opportunity to participate in an ongoing dialogue and offer suggestions for program improvement. It also allows an opportunity each Friday to let go of any stress or frustration that has built up. It's like a sigh of relief that allows them to go home with a lighter heart and a little bit better company for their family, significant other, or pet. I've had many employees thank me for "letting me get it off my chest."

Information I gather through good two-way communication is just that — information. Once I freed myself from value judgments of 'good news' or 'bad news,' I could take the appropriate action and move forward with a plan. If our schools are to improve through a team's best ideas and concerns, then a culture of open communication and trust must be fostered and cultivated. The Director or leader of any enterprise has to walk the walk if she expects to get the talk. I have found the simple 15/5 to be one great tool in creating an atmosphere where people want to talk.

