

How Can School Leaders Communicate Better?

By Ben Newmark

Good leadership is often said to be empathetic. Good leaders appreciate others have different perspectives and can imagine themselves in the positions of others when they make decisions.

But there's a problem.

Empathy – in the way the word is mostly used – might not even be possible.

To be empathetic we must imagine ourselves as other people, which is inherently contradictory because if we were someone else, we wouldn't be us.

Empathy is also ego driven, because it relies on the assumption that other people think the way we do. That if we were in their position, we would feel the same. This can push us further away from people and make it harder to understand them: "Wow? They said what? If I were them, I wouldn't say that!"

Respectful attention is a more realistic aim. Whether leaders agree with what other people think, say and do, leaders must nonetheless acknowledge the realities of others.

Good Communication = Respectful Attention

To pay proper attention, school leaders must communicate well with people in their teams. They need to engage in dialogue with their staff, or rather multiple dialogues because no school is just one school ([more on that here](#)), and working out what people in the building really think and feel, and ensuring they understand what is expected of them, means communicating with as many people in as many different roles as possible.

TeacherTapp data shows teachers don't think communication from leaders is always done very well.

Around 40% of teachers say they thought their leadership did not communicate well most of the time (2021) and only 44% said they felt their line manager was usually aware of their problems and issues. (2019).

This should be a systemic worry given how important communication is to teachers.

Communicating Across The Hierarchy

I've been reading the surveys that teachers send to leaders via Teacher Tapp's 'School Surveys' service and report after report mentions communication between the different strata of school hierarchies.

In fact, teachers have said so much about it, it's hard to get a signal from the noise. They variously say: there's too much communication; there isn't enough of it; it's too long and wordy; it's too abrupt and rude; it's not iterative or prescriptive enough; it's so iterative and prescriptive that it's annoyingly condescending.

There are contradictions between schools and even within the same schools.

None of which is probably a surprise to leadership. Practical experience shows people perceive communications in different ways. A quick email request seen by one person as efficient and to the point, is perceived by another as upsettingly abrupt and rude.

This messiness and inconsistency can make it tempting to locate negative opinions about communication as being a fault of those that receive the message: "If he'd just read his emails properly, he'd know when duty starts," or "We sent out the exam timetable months ago – I can't believe she's asking again!"

This is where empathy strikes a problem. Leaders who would have understood the email the first time will 'empathise' by putting themselves in the other person's position and come to the conclusion that the person must be being lax or purposely ignoring the email, because the leader knows that's the only reason they, themselves, wouldn't have read it.

Empathy is also made harder by the way in which senior school leaders typically work as small, distinct decision-making groups. When you've had lots and lots of conversations about something it can be very hard to be fully aware what others haven't had access to these conversations think. The other group have none of the background knowledge that makes the implicit explicit to decision makers, which may be why they aren't caring about it or be as invested in as senior leaders.

All of this makes communication tough for schools.

Consistency isn't enough

What I've learned from reading the SchoolSurvey reports is that aiming for consistency can't be the answer, because the teams and people in the school aren't consistent. Needs and wants vary.

A simple example of this is how email works. Should there be a policy on when these are sent and what can schools do when those who work in them want very different things from this policy?

Schools may use hierarchical structures to manage emails if they wish; either explicitly or implicitly making the issue of communication the problem of those who receive it.

And if teaching were highly competitive, -with high retention rates and large fields for vacancies this might be okay, but this isn't reality – we're finding it hard to get people to work in our schools and we're finding it hard to get them to stay.

Which means we all need to keep the teachers we have, by paying attention to them and respecting their concerns. And they care a lot about how they are communicated with.

Here are some specific examples:

Teachers hate not knowing why they must do things – and 41% say they don't know a lot of the time.

Teachers hate not knowing what they should do, but 53% say they often don't.

Teachers hate it when they feel they aren't listened to – but only 44% of teachers say they their leaders listen most of the time.

Leadership teams rightly spend lots of time thinking about and making decisions. But what this data shows is that you ALSO need to spend a lot of time also thinking about how leadership decisions will be communicated. If you don't, you can end up with even more confusion.

Exact answers for each school will differ, but the reports and the data does show some broad principles that are probably important in almost all contexts:

1. Say why. People like to understand why a decision as been made. If they understand they're more likely to be respect it even if they don't agree.
2. Keep whole staff communication as brief and as clear as possible. The longer it takes people to understand what they're supposed to do the more likely it is they won't know what to do.
3. Sense check communication with people before sending out to everyone. What seems obvious to leadership might be less so to those who weren't in the room when the decision was made.
4. Be open. If someone doesn't agree with a decision where is the place they can say so professionally? If there isn't one, then make one.
5. Know your staff. One size often doesn't fit all. If you have a staff member who regularly seems to misunderstand what's expected then ask them why and pay attention to what they say.

People like to be consulted and welcome the sense their leaders are approachable and open to a conversation of professional equals – it leads to better knowledge of a school and the problems people are facing, which makes better decisions more likely. All of us assess our relationships by the way in which we are talked to. Whenever and however a school communicates with its communities it is talking to its members and with each communication it affects its relationships.

All of us are different and like to be talked to in different ways – a mark of care is when people pay attention and respect us even when their preferences are different – even when we can't empathise with these.

None of this is easy, but as a start leadership teams might make how they communicate and how these communications are perceived an explicit primary focus.

And, if you're interested, we can help! Our [School Surveys service](#) helps you find out what staff, pupils and parents are really thinking - plus it helps to put it in context against our national benchmarks, so you know if things are normal or some kind of smash-glass emergency!

If you're interested in what teachers feel about how you communicate at your school we'd love to have a chat.

[In whatever way is best for you!](#)