

## September 2024 TfM – Communication and Engagement with Families

“...My thoughts this month have been around the vital relationships between us, as school leaders and class teachers, and the families of the learners in our schools. Proactivity is one way to build strong relationships that stand us in good stead for the coming year. Make the first conversation a positive, interested one. It also helps us to understand each family’s needs...”

In her book, *A-Z of diversity and inclusion*, Rachel Macfarlane has a chapter about Relationships. She discusses and sets out some ‘suggestions for embedding impactful parental engagement – especially for the families of underserved learners’

She quotes from another of her books – *Obstetrics for Schools* – where she said,

‘Schools which are serious about striving to achieve high performance outcomes for all learners appreciate that they cannot do it alone...

Their leaders are relentless in ensuring that their staff are welcoming towards parents and carers, meticulous in maintaining effective and impactful communication and determined to work in partnership with every family.’

There is no magic wand. However, to bolster our efforts to establish good, healthy relationships with our parent communities, here are six tips are from a range of other sectors that offer practical ways to approach the issue.

### **Listen to understand, not to judge**

How we navigate high-stakes communication really matters. When emotions run high, it’s all too easy to rush to judgement instead of remaining curious. However, by reserving judgement and asking great questions (and listening properly to the answer), we can unlock a whole range of factors causing the behaviour we are seeing.

Palliative care doctors, crisis communicators and hostage negotiators are all trained on how to de-escalate situations. The approach they take is to ask great questions like:

- Can you tell me your understanding of what’s happened to bring us to this point?
- What about this is important to you?
- How can I help to make this better for us?
- How do you want to feel at the end of this meeting?
- How would you like me to proceed?
- What is it that brought us into this situation?
- How can we solve this problem?
- What’s the objective? / What are we trying to accomplish here?
- How would I do that?

Listening to the answer without interruption, repeating what we have heard and asking them if we’ve got it right is a great way to begin to reach a common understanding. If they say ‘no, that’s not right’ we have the chance to ask further questions. Resolution is never found when we are at cross-purposes.

### **‘No’ can be an opener, not just a shut-down**

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Sometimes we propose something to a parent and their answer is no. This can create an instant flashpoint. But finding out what the 'no' means is a more practical approach.

According to Chris Voss (ex-FBI), 'no' can mean:

- I am not yet ready to agree.
- You are making me feel uncomfortable.
- I do not understand.
- I want something else.
- I need more information.
- I want to talk it over with someone else.

We can start finding out what is behind the 'no' by asking things like, 'What would it take for you to agree?', or 'What would need to change for a 'yes'?'

### **Green scripts and blue scripts**

Alfred Hitchcock wrote two scripts for *The Birds*, one green and one blue. The blue script was for the standard dialogue and scene direction; the green one was for how he wanted people to feel when during those scenes.

This is a useful way to think about how we communicate with parents. We may present the facts in our induction pack, for example, but how will they feel? We have to think not just about what we are telling them but just as importantly how that may land with them.

Thinking through in advance how we will ensure a meeting about a complaint feels like a space for problem-solving rather than blame and judgement is crucial for everyone's psychological safety.

So don't go into these meetings with a blue script full of hard facts alone. Remember your green script, which will allow people to disagree and to work through their own emotions towards resolution.

### **The language of authority**

Many of the small things we do may well be 'tells' that we are not talking to parents as the adults they are. For example, introducing myself as 'Mrs Johnson' but referring to the parent as 'mum' or 'dad' places me in a position of authority over them. This can feel not only deeply impersonal, but also dismissive.

A better way would be to say, 'I'm Mrs Johnson, what would you like me to call you?'. This sounds like a small thing but ask any group of parents if they want to be defined exclusively by that role and it will open some interesting discussions.

Change experts are clear: lording authority over others seldom sets the conversation on the right footing.

### **Avoid difficult conversations**

Susan Scott works in leadership development with the biggest global companies. Her advice: do not call them 'difficult conversations'. Call them important or crucial conversations instead. They may not be all that difficult and calling them that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Scott's model is:

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- Name the issue
- Select a specific example of the issue you are here to address
- Describe your emotions about this issue
- Clarify what is at stake
- Identify your contribution to this problem ('I didn't call you early enough', 'I haven't been clear enough', or even 'I missed something')
- Indicate your wish to resolve the issue
- Invite the person to respond

### **Communicate your values every chance you get**

Good relationships start well before a fracture occurs. However, once it does, crisis communication expert Amanda Coleman is very clear that during and after we should do all we can to build bridges.

How we communicate builds trust and belief; we need to use every opportunity to live out the values that are plastered all over our letters and our signs. Collaboration, empathy and opportunity for all apply to parental relationships as much as those with pupils. In a polarised world that is quick to blame, defend and attack, we must make time for finding long-term, sustainable resolutions.

That doesn't mean we don't have high standards, high expectations and non-negotiables, but we need to see the person behind the complaint, the issue behind the symptoms and the resolution underneath the tension.

We can do both.

I thought this might be worth consideration as we start the new school year where we take the opportunity to make 'fresh starts' all round.