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Community Relations

# 4

## **Communicating Effectively: Everybody's Job**

Clearly, one of the hallmarks of effective relationships is the ability to communicate. Likewise, a hallmark of rocky relationships is a lack of such ability. This is true in relationships on all levels, and it is especially pertinent to effective school-community relations. When problems exist in school-community relations, they usually exist more because of a breakdown in communication than they do for any other reason. In other words, most school leaders understand the importance in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders. What they often fail to understand is the complexity of communication as a skill.

To understand why this is so, an examination of the many steps in the communication process is in order. Each of these steps is vital to effective communication. A breakdown in any one of them can, and usually does, lead to miscommunication.

## SHOWCASE

### Public Hearings

Public hearings are great places to practice your communication skills. This is most apparent when the hearing deals with a controversial matter such as recommended changes to school attendance zones. At this type of hearing, more than a thousand patrons could show up to defend their right to be "eagles," "panthers," "rebels," "tigers," or "warriors" for life. Hearings are about listening, and people want no less the opportunity to be heard than the actual chance to speak. The converse of this understanding would be *not* having a hearing on a critical issue. If only 10 people show up to a hearing, then they still feel good about having been afforded the opportunity. Hearings are not places to argue with presenters. It is their turn to talk, and they expect the board and administration to look like they are interested in their ideas. Public hearings are seldom places where decisions are made, but they are always places where public perceptions are forged.

## The Communication Process

Many of us recall playing a game when we were children that required one person to tell a story to another person who subsequently passed the story on to a third person. As the game progressed and the story moved from one person to the next, it became somewhat distorted. At the end of the game, the story bore little resemblance to the original tale. The lesson we learned is that communication can be difficult. Communication, too often thought of as a single act, is best understood as a complex process. The process is not complex because it challenges our cognitive abilities, but it gains its complexity by virtue of the significance of each individual step. A problem with any one of the steps can often lead to devastating outcomes. Consider the following illustration:

As principal of XYZ Middle School, you believe that the faculty should consider changing the time of day scheduled for the upcoming Open House. Instead of hosting the Open House from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. as has traditionally been the norm, you believe that more families would be served by the event being scheduled between the hours of 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Understanding the steps to effective communication can help you avoid an unnecessarily unpleasant situation when you share these feelings with your faculty.

### Idea Formation

Idea formation is the first step in the communication process. This step is largely internal and only involves the constitution of the speaker. It is at this initial stage of communication where the speaker generates the idea he or she intends to communicate. In the above example, idea formation occurred when the principal began thinking about the upcoming Open House. The principal in this example examined what had previously been practiced and evaluated it within his/her own experiences. A judgment was made, and the necessity to communicate this idea to others was established.

Idea formation, it must be understood, is an important step and is one in which mistakes can certainly be made. If, for example, the judgment of the principal is incorrect, then there is an increased likelihood that the idea generated will be flawed. Suppose, for example, there are logical reasons why Open House is scheduled between 4:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. If the principal is unaware of these reasons, then he/she will draw an incorrect conclusion regarding whether or not the schedule should be changed. The good news is that idea formation is generally internal. As a result, there is time to correct the idea before it is released to everybody else. In essence, a key to idea formation is to consider many alternatives and keep as open a mind as possible.

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## Idea Encoding

Idea encoding is the process by which the idea is put into language (words and symbols) that is appropriate for conveying the intended message. Again, this step is largely internal. As such, it seems difficult to imagine any problem with this step. In fact, many communication problems have their roots deeply planted in idea encoding. Consider, once again, our example of the principal of XYZ Middle School. This principal has a vast array of options for encoding the idea about changing the Open House schedule. If the idea is communicated verbally, there are choices to be made in regards to words, intonations, and body language that must be considered. If the idea is to be communicated in writing, while body language is no longer an issue, there is even greater emphasis placed on word choice.

The opportunities for a communication breakdown are great at this stage of communication. Unless the principal's actions and attitudes are already clearly understood by the faculty, the words chosen to communicate the above idea become crucial. If the principal chooses to communicate this message in a one-way manner, then far greater importance gets placed on the encoding. Exhibits 4-1 and 4-2 on page 78 illustrate two examples of how this idea could have been encoded. Without knowing the biases of the faculty these messages were intended for, consider how you would receive the two of them.

The intended message in both of these examples is the same. In fact, there are honestly few variations between them. Which one would you receive more positively, though? Which one is more inclusive and appears the most welcoming? The way in which an idea is encoded is vitally important to the success of any communications process.

## Communication Channel

The method by which an individual communicates an idea is referred to as the communication channel. In the example from XYZ Middle School, as an illustration, the principal has a vast array of options for communicating the idea about changing the Open House schedule. The message could be delivered in writing, which would clearly only allow for one-way communication. The message could also be delivered verbally, maybe at a faculty meeting. This two-way communication would give others an opportunity to give an immediate response, which would inform the principal about the accuracy and merit of the original idea.

The concept of a communication channel implies the timeliness of communication as well. If the Open House schedule is important, for example, then even if the principal chooses the best words and attitudes to communicate the idea, it better be perceived by others to have been done in a timely fashion. Telling the faculty the morning of Open House that a schedule change

### Exhibit 4-1 Negatively Encoded Message

Staff,

It has come to my attention that the annual XYZ Open House has been scheduled between the hours of 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. This strikes me as a bit absurd. If we truly want Open House to provide parents with an opportunity to visit our school and learn of our goals, then we must schedule it at a more convenient time. Therefore, this year's Open House will begin at 6:00 p.m. and conclude at 8:00 p.m.

### Exhibit 4-2 Positively Encoded Message

Staff,

In keeping with our goals of welcoming parents and of being sensitive to their needs, I think we need to reexamine our XYZ Open House schedule. My understanding is that this annual event has traditionally been held between the hours of 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. Given the demanding work schedules inflicting many of our parents, I believe that we would be most accommodating if we held this year's event from 6:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. Your feedback, as always, is most welcome.

is being considered, as an illustration, will certainly lead to a breakdown in communication. In fact, with an event as important as the annual Open House, even one week's notice may be too little. Inherent in decisions about the best way or channel in which to communicate an idea is the necessity of understanding the situations of those you are communicating with. Parents have many obligations to consider in planning such events. Childcare is an obvious example. By failing to allow enough time to communicate information about the Open House, you run the risk of causing negative feelings among the very group you are trying to develop positive relationships with.

### Receiver Decoding

The final step in the communication process is called receiver decoding. At this point, the responsibility for communication has temporarily shifted from the individual who originated the thought to the person who is receiving the information. It is at this stage that problems are encountered time

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## SHOWCASE

### Communications Notebook

At one school with which I am familiar there is a Communication Notebook beside the staff "sign-in" sheet. The notebook is used for staff members to share written reminders, commendations, thank yous, questions, jokes, announcements, and updates for the entire staff to read. The notebook has been an invaluable tool for positive communication within this particular school building. It is the only vehicle that can be used by all of staff members and ensures that everyone will see the information at least first thing in the morning and at the end of the day. The administrative team writes the majority of the items, but the rest of the faculty is VERY comfortable using the notebook to include jokes and other updates. Such ideas as this can become lasting parts of a school's culture and can provide a positive forum in which people can share.

and time again. If you have ever been in a situation where you thought you said one thing, but people heard something different, then you may have experienced a breakdown in receiver decoding.

Because receiver decoding does not take place internal to the person who originated the idea, it is difficult for that person to control. I may consider my idea very carefully. I may choose the most appropriate words and symbols for communicating it, as well. Finally, the communication channel I use might be the best one in this circumstance and might afford you the best opportunity to ask for clarification. If, however, you do not perceive my message in the way I intended, then a communication breakdown outside of my control will have occurred. This can be extremely frustrating and can lead to accusations such as, "You weren't listening to what I said." These accusations, as we know, are often incorrect.

There are many factors that affect whether or not receiver decoding is accurate, as intended. Although the most obvious factors are within our control (i.e., idea formation, idea encoding, communication channel), there are others that are far more difficult to plan for. There may be a language barrier, a cultural difference, a difference in the reading level if the message was sent in writing, or a temporarily poor attitude on the part of the receiver. At XYZ Middle School, for example, if the principal had just delivered news to the faculty that angered them, then their ability to accurately decode the message about Open House may surely be affected by their attitude. Consistent, positive communication and providing ready accessibility to information are

ways to reduce the inaccuracy of receiver decoding. This is why a contemporary body of research states that school leaders ought to be visible and ought to communicate on a regular and consistent basis (Fiore, 1999; Whitaker, 1997; Stolp, 1996).

There are, as mentioned, so many opportunities for miscommunication to occur anywhere along the continuum of the communication process. If our goal is to develop and nurture positive communication with all stakeholders within the school community, then we must understand this process and constantly examine our effectiveness in using it. We will not eliminate all communication breakdowns. We can, however, minimize them by paying attention to the process and understanding the specifics of how breakdowns in communication typically occur.

### **Nonverbal Communication: It's Not What You Said, But How You Said It**

If only communication problems were limited to a misunderstanding of the communication process. If only we needed to concern ourselves solely with the words we chose and the way in which we chose to use them. Unfortunately, it is not nearly that simple. We communicate so many of our ideas without ever saying a word. Our nonverbal communication is often far more powerful than our verbal communication is.

Say, for instance, you and I are talking and I observe that you are sitting with your arms tightly folded across your chest. I also notice that your legs are tightly crossed, and I become a bit uneasy. To myself, I begin examining the nature of our conversation. Am I upsetting you? Have the words I have chosen to communicate, in some way, offended you? Are you unwilling to speak with me, and would you have preferred that I wrote you a note or called you on the telephone? Is there something wrong with you that has caused you to misinterpret what I am saying?

All of these questions race through my mind because of my perception of your nonverbal communication. Your arms tightly folded and legs tightly crossed tell me that you are angry or unreceptive to what I am saying. Although it certainly was not my intent to do so, I am certain that I have somehow offended or bothered you. Not being able to stand it any longer, I ask you what I have done and why you are upset. When you reply that you are not at all upset, I inform you of the negative vibes I am picking up from your body language, or nonverbal communication. You reply to me is simple, "Doug, it's freezing in here." Imagine the snowball effect that may have taken place if I had been uncomfortable or unwilling to confront my perceptions of your nonverbal behavior. This sort of misunderstanding routinely occurs in our interactions with others.

#### Exhibit 4-3

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### Exhibit 4-3 Examples of Nonverbal Communication

Interpretation	Nonverbal Communication
When people are feeling <i>nervous</i> , they are often likely to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear their throat</li> <li>• Avoid eye contact</li> <li>• Perspire</li> <li>• Fidget</li> <li>• Rapidly move their leg up and down</li> <li>• Speak faster than normal</li> <li>• Swallow frequently</li> </ul>
When people are feeling <i>annoyed or frustrated</i> , they are often likely to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clench their hands</li> <li>• Clench their jaw</li> <li>• Place their hands on their hips</li> <li>• Shake their head from side to side</li> <li>• Breathe deeply and exhale forcefully</li> </ul>
When people are feeling <i>insecure</i> around somebody, they are often likely to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid eye contact</li> <li>• Place their hands in their pockets</li> <li>• Bite their nails</li> <li>• Tug at their clothing</li> </ul>
When people are feeling <i>confident</i> , they are often likely to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exhibit good posture</li> <li>• Sit back in their chair</li> <li>• Clasp their hands behind their back</li> <li>• Make frequent eye contact</li> <li>• Rest their hands comfortably on a desk or table</li> </ul>

There are probably as many incorrect interpretations made about nonverbal communication as there are correct ones. In the above example, while it is true that tightly crossed arms and legs often signify resistance, anger, or being upset, they also signify being cold. My failure to consider that caused a real breakdown in communication. Exhibit 4-3 illustrates some of the more common interpretations of an individual's body language

There clearly are other examples of nonverbal communication that we tend to associate with particular feelings or attitudes. It is vital that we remember, though, that the exhibition of a certain behavior does not necessarily mean that we have the associated attitudes or feelings at the moment we are gesturing. I am reminded of an example that recently happened to me.



For the purpose of illustration, allow this personal, non-technical example to serve as another way of understanding the power of nonverbal communication. As a young boy growing up, a summertime reward I experienced was to go to work with my father from time to time. My father was an executive in a New York City company, and he worked in a high-rise office building. Since these experiences always occurred in the summertime when school was not in session for me, there was always at least one empty office, which was vacated by an employee who was taking his or her summer vacation. Since Dad was busy most of the day, I would sit in the vacant office imagining that I was a businessperson. As all children do, I had learned to act like I thought a businessperson should act by observing a businessperson, namely Dad. Well, Dad, as I observed, had a habit whenever he was in a high-powered meeting of holding his hands out in front of him with his fingertips of his left hand touching the fingertips of his right hand in a gesture resembling a church steeple. This, I reasoned was "the business posture." Consequently, I learned at a relatively young age "the business posture."

Although I never entered the business world but became an educator instead, images of my father as a working man always stayed with me. Years later, when I was working at my first institution of higher education, a colleague rather bluntly said to me, "Fiore, do you realize that you steeple?" Not only did I fail to realize it, but I also had no idea what it meant to steeple. This colleague of mine bluntly explained that steeping, or holding my hands out in front of myself with the fingertips of my left hand touching the fingertips of my right hand in a gesture resembling a church steeple, meant that I thought I was superior to all others. I must assure you that I do not feel that way at all. To the contrary, I am in awe of most other people. I also realize, however, that I have adopted many of my father's mannerisms as a tribute to his memory.

The point is that nonverbal behaviors can tell us an awful lot about how people are feeling at a given moment. For this reason, it is wise for anybody concerned with human relations to be conscious of their own nonverbal behaviors as well as the nonverbal behaviors of others. These behaviors can be misleading, though. I sincerely steeple subconsciously, without the associated attitude that my colleague suspected. People really do cross their arms from time to time to signify that they are feeling cold. Some individuals swallow frequently, not because they are nervous but because they have a sore throat.

## Communication Barriers

Because there are so many steps to effective communication, there are so many more opportunities for miscommunication. As mentioned, failure at any one of the steps can lead to a total communication breakdown. These barriers to communication do not occur only because of failures during the communication process. They are, likewise, not all caused by misinterpretations

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of people's nonverbal communication. Instead, there are other barriers to communication that school leaders must be cognizant of. Understanding these barriers and recognizing when you are facing them, can cure many ills of miscommunication.

### **Language Barriers**

This more obvious communication barrier seemed less significant 20 years ago than it is today. This is due to the fact that an increasingly large number of families with children in our schools do not speak or read English at a level of functional literacy.

The first edition of this textbook used data from the 1990 U.S. Census, which illustrated that people who do not speak English as their first language inhabited 13.8% of U.S. households. While it could once be assumed that this 13.8% lived in urban areas, this is increasingly not the case. Comparatively, more recent census data reveals that in 2006, about 8 million more people spoke a foreign language at home than in 2000. Nationally, 1 in 5 (19.7%) people older than age 5 spoke a language other than English at home, compared to 17.9% in 2000. Children from homes in which English is never spoken or is spoken as a secondary language represent one of the fastest growing segments of our school populations. This is true in almost all areas of the United States. The parents of these children must be communicated with just like the parents of English-speaking children must.

Given these facts, school leaders must be aware that non-English proficient families live in virtually every corner of the United States. Though the influx of non-English proficient is certainly greater in larger cities like New York and Los Angeles, smaller communities continue to be affected by this trend at an ever-increasing rate. Consequently, school administrators ought to closely examine whether or not the personnel is in place to facilitate communication with stakeholders who are not proficient in English. Beyond that, the best school leaders in recognition of their community role are well served to make themselves more skilled at communicating with people in languages other than English.

### **Cultural Barriers**

As so much communication takes place nonverbally, it is imperative that school administrators recognize the different cultural interpretations of body language and space. I am reminded here of an exhibit that I once saw in a museum. This exhibit was designed to illustrate the differences that exist in spatial proximity between communicants in various cultures. By standing on footprints strategically placed on the floor of this exhibit, two people could mimic the distance that would be customary to have between them during a conversation if they were from different cultures. This illustrated the fact

that people clearly differ in their tolerance for personal space; some prefer very close communication distances, whereas others prefer farther distances (O'Hair & Ropo, 1994). Four zones (Hall, 1969) in which all communication takes place consist of the intimate zone (skin contact to 18 inches), the personal zone (18 inches to 4 feet), the social zone (4 to 12 feet), and the public zone (12 feet and beyond). It is imperative that school leaders understand the tremendous barrier erected when they violate an individual's rule of personal space.

Additionally, think back for a moment to Exhibit 4-3. The typical interpretations of nonverbal communications illustrated there are representative of the American culture. In other cultures represented by families in our schools, these interpretations would be much different. For example, consider the cultural differences noted in whether or not individuals gaze into a speaker's eyes when they are listening to them (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1989). Anglos are socialized to gaze directly at the speaker's face when they are listening; Japanese-Americans avoid eye contact when listening by focusing on the speaker's neck so as not to appear rude; African-Americans and Native Americans rarely look directly into the eyes of an authority figure. These cultural differences must be appreciated so that school leaders do not misinterpret them. Otherwise, unnecessary barriers to effective communication are created.

### **Barriers Inherent in Specific Physical Disabilities**

An often forgotten and frequently underrepresented group of stakeholders are those individuals with physical disabilities. Dependent upon the limitations of the individual, their communication requirements may be the same as individuals without disabilities, or they may be profoundly different. Think, for example, of a person who is legally blind. This individual will not be able to pick up on subtle facial gestures to the same degree as a person who was not blind would. Consequently, school personnel must be sensitive to the degree to which their messages are typically delivered through facial gestures. An increased effort to verbally articulate points without the reliance on nonverbal gestures may certainly be in order. Along these same lines, consider the limitations that might face a person who relies on lip reading to "hear" what is being communicated. It may be that this person is a better "listener" than somebody who has full use of his or her ears for this purpose. It also may be, however, that the rate at which we speak should be altered for this individual. Again, school personnel, particularly the leaders, must be sensitive to these differences.

### **Barriers Related to Time**

Due to the frenetic pace at which our schools often operate, the time necessary for meaningful communication is often unavailable. In fact, conversations with school principals consistently lead to frank discussions about the

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lack of time available for the human relations that these leaders find to be integral components of successfully performing their duties.

It is really a simple fact. Communication takes time. Too often, school leaders are unable or unwilling to devote the time necessary for proper communication. This failure leads to criticisms being levied, which question the concern, commitment, and fairness of the leader. It also leads to school administrators who feel forced to use quick communication techniques (i.e., e-mail, memos, announcements) instead of the more time-consuming techniques (i.e., telephone conversations, face-to-face meetings). These time-related issues lead to a great communication paradox. The mistakes that so often occur when individuals rush through the communication process often lead to their having to take more time to fix problems caused by their hurrying in the first place. Taking the time to communicate purposefully and carefully in the beginning saves time in the long run.

## Overcoming Communication Barriers

As a disclaimer, it must be accepted that communication barriers will exist as long as people continue to openly communicate their innermost concerns, values, feelings, joys, loves, and frustrations. The human dimension, so prevalent in communication, necessitates that misunderstandings and barriers will always be present. There are techniques, though, that when properly employed can greatly reduce many of the more common communication barriers we all experience. As is the case with all new skills, these techniques must be practiced until they become automatic parts, or habits, of our behavior.

### Perception Checking

Recall the earlier example of our fictitious conversation in which you had your arms tightly folded across your chest. Remember how I was unnerved by your body language? Recall, if you will, the struggle I had in understanding just what it was I said that offended you. Most importantly, remember how incorrect my assumption of your body language was. You were not angry or unwilling to listen. You were, in fact, cold.

Had I checked my perception of your body language with you, I could have avoided a great deal of my confusion and concern regarding your feelings. I could have found out early on that you were not unhappy with me, but were instead cold. I could have perhaps offered you a blanket to warm you up and then proceeded with our conversation.

Using the skill of perception checking requires that you ask the person you are communicating with whether or not you are correctly perceiving their feelings. It does not imply any judgment of these feelings, but rather

affords you an opportunity to see if you have perceived them correctly. In our example, it would sound something like this: "I notice that you are crossing your arms. Are you unhappy with something I said?" Your reply would have been simple. "No Doug, I'm just cold." Failure to use perception checking may have led to a conversation sounding more like this: "When you sit there with your arms folded and your angry, closed-minded attitude, I just can't stand being around you." Your potential reply in this example may be best left unsaid.

### Communicating Regularly

Communication that occurs with a regular pattern can become predictable. This predictability is often helpful as people come to expect it and are consequently ready to receive it. The mere fact that they are ready can greatly reduce the chance that they will misinterpret the communication that they are expecting. Of additional consideration is the degree to which this regular communication is positive. If an individual can rely on receiving some positive communication on a regular basis, then he or she will look with more favorable anticipation on any communication that he or she receives. Basically, the individual will receive the communication with the anticipation that it will be positive. Consider the following situations as examples:

**Situation 1:** You are principal of Sparrow Elementary School. It has long been a practice in your school to communicate often with parents. This communication comes from teachers, support staff, and the main office, and it occurs when good things happen, as well as when bad things occur. Your staff sends home notes touting positive student behaviors, makes five positive telephone calls per week, and hosts a monthly tea for all parents whose children had been "caught being good" during that month.

**Situation 2:** You are principal of Crow Elementary School. With student discipline being a major concern, teachers, support staff, and office staff make numerous telephone calls daily to parents of children who misbehave. Additionally, a note is drafted in the main office that goes home with every student who breaks a rule. It is expected that this note, signed by both you and the staff member reporting the offense, be returned to the office within 48 hours complete with a parent's signature. As a result of this, you do communicate with at least a few parents on a daily basis.

Now, in both of these situations communication occurs on a regular basis. Therefore, as principal of either Sparrow or Crow, you are to be commended for creating a pattern of predictability. Had you failed to communicate

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regularly with parents, you would have discovered that your occasional communication attempts might have been met with some skepticism. Regular communication sharply reduces this negative response.

That being said, the situation at Sparrow Elementary School is far more appealing due to the fact that communication occurs in both good and bad times. Because there is such a strong effort on behalf of the school staff to communicate positive things to parents, the occasions requiring negative news to be delivered are much easier to handle. Crow Elementary School parents, on the other hand, are used to receiving only news that is negative in nature. Though this communication is regular, parents receiving it are conditioned to expecting the worst. In fact, when a note comes home from school or a telephone message from the school is left on the family answering machine, I am certain that it is received with negative anticipation. Sparrow parents, on the other hand, receive their messages from the school with a much greater degree of hope.

### **Communicating Purposefully**

Whenever teachers claim that they do not like staff meetings, they hate to see the principal walking toward them to speak with them, or they rarely read memos from the office, I invariably ask them, "Why?" Though there are a wide variety of responses given, the most common one centers on the notion that the principal is not communicating anything of importance. This leads to the idea of purposeful communication. Even if an individual fully understands the communication process, reads nonverbal cues (other's, as well as his or her own), and communicates regularly, he or she erects a giant communication barrier when the communication occurs with no apparent purpose. Schools are places of a tremendous amount of activity. Teaching is a consuming profession. Across the country, the role of many support staff members is increasing in both depth and breadth. Parents, when they can appropriately volunteer, often need to rearrange their work schedules to find the time to assist. Consequently, good school leaders need to communicate with a purpose. They do a tremendous disservice to stakeholders when they waste people's time communicating information that is irrelevant. While it is vitally important to make communication a priority, it is equally important to do so only when there is something of value to communicate. This doesn't imply that there is a limited definition of what constitutes valuable information to communicate. There is no intention here to state that curricular issues, for example, are the only issues that are important. Instead, we must recognize that personal issues, as well as professional issues, may be equally valuable, or even more valuable to communicate in some cases. What is intended here is an understanding that the stakeholders involved must perceive the communication that occurs in a school as being important.

In research conducted in Illinois and Indiana schools with great variety in all forms of demographic profile data, Fiore (1999) found that recognizing the power of regular, purposeful, and positive communication is one way in which principals influence school culture (p. 133). Furthermore, this research created an undeniable link between the principal's ability to communicate both regularly and purposefully and the degree to which teachers viewed their school's culture positively. In some of the schools studied, a great deal of the communication provided by the principal was personal in nature. This pattern of communication was very consistent with a friendly, caring environment revealing the culture of these schools. In others, conversely, the communication was largely professional. Again, the important issue was that this communication pattern was consistent with the culture of these schools. Regardless of the school's overall culture, though, the principal played an invaluable role and made an indelible mark on sustaining the culture through the regular, purposeful communication patterns exhibited. In all cases, teachers, staff members, and parents appreciated the fact that the principal communicated regularly, and that this communication had a clearly understood purpose.

## Chapter Summary

- One of the most important aspects of positive, successful relationships is the ability to communicate effectively.
- There are many steps to the communication process. Failure or errors in any of these steps can result in a communication breakdown.
- We communicate a great deal through nonverbal means. Therefore, the ability to understand our own nonverbal idiosyncrasies becomes vitally important.
- Perception checking is a skill that allows us to ascertain the extent to which we are successfully reading another person's nonverbal messages.
- We are increasingly finding native languages to be a barrier to effective communication.
- Other barriers, such as cultural issues and physical disabilities must be understood as we evaluate our communication plans.
- Through thoughtful, intentional efforts, communication barriers can be overcome.

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## CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

### All the News That's Fit to Print—And Then Some

Maria Rodriguez was highly respected for her leadership skills and her dedication to school improvement. During the 6 years in which she had been principal of Lincoln High School, the student body had experienced steady gains on standardized assessments, and parent and community support had strengthened. By most measures, Maria was an outstanding high school principal.

The day after this year's standardized achievement test results were released to the local press, Maria got an unexpected visit from a newspaper reporter who was new to the local paper. Not being very experienced, he sat down nervously in Maria's office and began asking her questions about the school's assessment results. As the conversation progressed, the reporter fidgeted in his seat, dropped his pencil several times, and was perspiring profusely. The situation was compounded by the frequent interruptions on the telephone and with discipline referrals arriving at Maria's office. After about 30 minutes and countless interruption, the two ended their conversation and the reporter left the school building to begin writing his story.

Maria Rodriguez was furious when she read the front-page story in the next morning's newspaper. Several facts about the school's test performance were misrepresented and Maria felt that many of her comments were taken out of context and made her appear apathetic to the importance of good test results. She vowed never to speak with that incompetent reporter again and began plotting how she would explain the facts in this newspaper story to her superintendent.

### Questions for Analysis

1. What effect, if any, did nonverbal communication have on the conversation between Maria Rodriguez and the reporter?
2. Were there any steps that Maria could have taken to reduce communication barriers that were present?
3. What are some issues relative to the communication process that Maria needs to consider before speaking with the Superintendent?
4. If you were Maria, how would you handle future situations with the press?