

Creating a Culture of Trust and Respect

Good internal communication strategies show staff they are valued, trusted, and respected

When community members want information about their school district, who do they turn to?

Dorreen Dembski, communications director at CESA #6, says it isn't who you may think it is.

"Your secretaries, janitors, and bus drivers are the first staff that your community members go to when they want information," Dembski said.

Co-presenter Richard Zimman, superintendent of the Ripon Area School District, put it in other words, "The best external communication you can have is good internal communication."

This is one of many reasons that internal communication is essential for the operation of a successful school district. Regular internal communication can save your district time and resources, establish positive relationships with staff, and promote trust and transparency in your district.

Dembski and Zimman said any communication, including internal communication with district staff, starts with listening. Communication that's effective is two-way. Zimman gave the example of how he goes to different schools in his district and holds regular listening sessions.

"The biggest factor for me when holding those sessions is to have no agenda," Zimman said. "You're saying to your staff, 'I'm just here for you. I want to hear what's on your mind.'"

The next step is establishing regular communication with your staff. Dembski and Zimman both say that communicating only when there's a problem is a bad strategy.

"The worst thing you can do is start communicating when there's a crisis," Dembski said. "Don't wait for a crisis. If you're not communicating,



you're not building relationships."

Regular communication can take the form of a video message from the superintendent or other administrator, or an internal newsletter or memo. Another good way to keep your staff in the loop, Dembski said, is to repurpose press releases sent to the media by also sending them to staff.

However, when communicating, Dembski and Zimman point out that you need to be aware of who is in your audience. For instance, research shows that men and women communicate differently. In addition, people in different generations also get information and communicate differently.

"When parents have questions, they will call me," Zimman said. "When students have questions, they will post it on the district's Facebook wall."

It's About Trust

Perhaps most importantly, regular communication with staff demonstrates: value, trust, appreciation, and respect. "Staff are expecting that you are the source for good commu-

nication," Dembski said. "That's really your responsibility as a leader to create that culture of trust."

Zimman added that establishing trust and respect through internal communication is especially valuable in today's political climate.

"I think internal communication is more critical than ever because our staff is angry," Zimman said. "That anger is directed at Madison and you need to make sure that anger isn't directed toward your district. We need to keep working and communicating with our teachers." ■

Session Details

TITLE *Instill Calm During the Storm of Change — Internal Communication Matters!*

PRESENTERS **Dorreen Dembski**, communications director, CESA #6; **Richard Zimman**, superintendent, Ripon Area School District