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Take your temperature with an effective thermometer

How healthy is your communication?

By William J. Banach

Maybe it's time to take the temperature of your communication program. Why? You may be working feverishly, slaving extra hours, wearing out the printing press . . . and doing the wrong things.

Conversely, your communication program may be very casual, with plenty of personal contact and no publications in sight. And you may have the perfect communication program.

Analysis—taking the temperature—is the first step in planning any communication program. Yet it is the most frequently ignored. Perhaps that's why so many public relations efforts don't make a difference.

One reason professionals haven't taken the time to analyze is lack of training. Very few communication people have had the good fortune to learn from someone who stressed ". . . knowing where you're going before you launch off."

A second reason is lack of an effective thermometer. Until recently, there has been no research-based method for conducting a communication audit. Public relations programs have been largely based on what others have done. We see what we consider a good idea, and we make it a part of our communication program. Yet, we don't take time to evaluate whether the idea is a productive and appropriate one for our situation.

Planning Communication: Key Considerations

There are several key factors to consider in planning school district communication. Two of these factors are the **environment** of the school district and the **community** which is a part of the environment.

These two factors—perhaps more than others—greatly influence the type of communication program needed in your school district. They also should be a consideration in the design of your management system.

Contingency theory provides a starting point for planning both communication and management systems. The basic axiom of this theory maintains that the structure and processes of a system (e.g., a school system) are a reflection of the environment around the system.

The more your school district's environment is changeable, the more your district must have processes for adapting to the changes. If your environment is stable, you must structure the school district and have processes which insure consistency, continuity, and control.

Two other contingency theory axioms deserve attention when planning communication:

1. There is more **total** communication in a system which must adapt often and quickly to changing environmental demands . . . and there is less **total** communication in a system which needs to adapt more slowly and less often.
2. There tends to be more reliance on informal communication (such as small group meetings and one-to-one contacts) in a system which must adapt often and quickly to changing environmental demands.

Auditing Your Communication

Following are two audit instruments from the Banach-Stech Communication Audit System.¹ The first measures the degree to which you must consider your environment in planning communication. The second relates to the nature of the community in which your school district is located.

Complete these audits. Then use the interpretative information which follows to assess whether your environment and community are appropriately accommodated in your communication program.

The Environmental Audit

Every organization is surrounded by other organizations, a community and, perhaps, competitors. These represent the environment. Read each question below and determine the extent to which it holds true for your organization and its environment. Then circle the number on the continuum scale which, in your opinion, provides the most appropriate rating.

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- A. To what extent does your school district have to take information about the community, region, and/or state into account when making plans and decisions?
to no extent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 to a great extent
- B. To what extent does your school district seem to face rapid changes in the factors which affect or influence plans and decisions?
to no extent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 to a great extent
- C. To what extent are the changes which do occur relatively unpredictable and unknown ahead of time?
to no extent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 to a great extent
- D. To what extent is information about the community, region, and/or state hard to find and use in making plans and decisions?
to no extent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 to a great extent
- E. To what extent are the factors which influence plans and decisions uncontrollable by the school district and its personnel?
to no extent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 to a great extent
- F. To what extent is it difficult to assess the effectiveness of plans or decisions before they are implemented?
to no extent 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 to a great extent
- Environmental Audit
Total Score
(Add numbers circled)

The Community Audit

The nature of your community affects school district functioning. It also affects communication patterns. The following rating scales focus on the nature of the community within which your school district functions.

Rate the extent to which you believe each statement applies to your school district and its surrounding community.		
Citizens are fairly homogeneous in educational background, values, income, occupation, and other demographic variables	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Citizens are highly diverse in educational background, values, income, occupation, and other demographic variables
The population of the community is fairly stable and not changing much	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	The population of the community is changing rapidly
There is almost no conflict among segments of the community on educational matters	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	There is a fairly high level of conflict among segments of the community on educational matters
The citizens and parents are relatively apathetic and uninterested in the school district and its programs	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	The citizens and parents are highly involved and interested in the school district and its program
Community Audit Total Score (Add numbers circled)		

Your Schools and the Environment

Divide the total score for your environmental audit by 8. Enter the resulting number on the grid below.

Your environment is simple and stable 1 2 3 4 + Your environment is complex and dynamic

The environment of a school district can range from stable and simple to complex and dynamic. Research has shown that in a stable and simple environment, a school district (or any organization) can use more formal, structured, and centralized communication methods. Conversely, in a complex and dynamic environment, communication should be more informal, unstructured and decentralized.

When the school district environment is complex and dynamic, more information has to be gathered, changes are rapid and unpredictable, information is hard to find, the school district lacks control over some factors, and effectiveness of decisions cannot be guaranteed ahead of time. An informal communication system is needed.

Ratings toward 2 above indicate a need for a consistent and controlled management system. Communication should be formal and semiformal.

Ratings toward 4+ indicate a need for an adaptable, flexible and open management system. Communication should be semiformal and informal.

Your Schools and the Community

Divide the total score for your community audit by 5. Enter the resulting number on the grid below.

Your community is homogeneous, stable, and not highly involved in school district operations

___1___2___3___4+___

Your community is diverse, unstable, and involved in school district operations

The community is part of the total environment, but a most important part. The community audit assesses the nature of this important environment. Four aspects of the community (diversity, change, conflict, and involvement) influence communication within the district and also between the district and the community.

Ratings toward 2 above indicate a need for a consistent and controlled management system. Communication should be formal and semiformal.

Ratings toward 4+ indicate a need for an adaptable, flexible, and open management system. Communication should be semiformal and informal.

A Model for Planning Communication

As you've seen, there are factors (such as the environment and the community) which should be considered in your communication planning. Of course, the question is, do you have the right communication system for your situation. As a general guideline, the model for the Banach-Stech Communication Audit appears below. It will help you determine whether your communication program should be formal or informal . . . or a combination of the two.

If You Have . . .

a homogeneous community
a simple, stable environment
a slow rate of change
little management teamwork
a basic educational program

You Ought to Have . . .

a management system which is consistent and controlled

This Requires . . .

less overall communication, including lower levels of communication with employees, parents, and other citizens and between departments, work units, and school buildings. Formal communication techniques are appropriate.

If You Have . . .

a diverse community
a dynamic, complex environment
a rapid rate of change
an integrated management team
a diverse educational program

You Ought to Have . . .

a management system which is adaptable, flexible and open

This Requires . . .

higher levels of overall communication, including higher levels of formal and semiformal communications with employees, higher levels of formal and informal communication with parents, and other citizens and higher levels of informal and semiformal communication between departments, units, and school buildings.

No one ever said communication was easy. But taking a research-based look at the factors which affect communication can keep your PR program on target and healthy.

Footnotes

1. The Banach-Stech Communication Audit, copyright 1981 by Banach-Stech Associates, Utica, MI 48087.