

**ISNA WEST COAST EDUCATION FORUM**  
**January 13-14, 2017**

**Paper Title**

Creating a Positive School Climate: Communication strategies for  
Complicated Relationships

**Track**

School Leadership (Board & Administration)

**Target Audience**

School Board Members and School Administration

## About the Presenter

**Rania El-Sioufi**, principal of Granada Islamic School in Santa Clara, CA, has served as an administrator of educational institutions for over 10 years. Having been raised in a very active East Coast Muslim community, she has a strong appreciation of the role Islamic Schools play in our communities. Her M.Ed. in Educational Leadership and Administrative Services Credential were earned with the goal of supporting that role and working with a team to bring Islamic school education to the next level of excellence. She is a strong advocate of student-centered classrooms and of incorporating technological advancements in classroom instruction. Sr. Rania is a frequent speaker about educational, parenting and *tarbiya* issues in the local, national, and global circuits. Outside of school and her professional activities, she spends her time with her husband, four daughters, and son enjoying a variety of outdoor activities.

### **Abstract**

One of the key factors in creating a positive school climate is a strong communication system. In Islamic schools we have unique environments where it becomes crucial to understand the big picture of communication and leadership, engage internal stakeholders, and connect with external stakeholders. Another element that negatively impacts the school climate and that principals often struggle with is communication on the principal-board level. Finally, because of the intimate social connections within our school communities, this paper will explore communication strategies to handle the some of the challenging situations that the school leaderships face.

### **1. The Big Picture**

Communication is an essential tool principals must use to create a positive Islamic school climate. Many problems in and out of school can be directly traced to whether information was communicated, how it was communicated, and who communicated it. Managing communications effectively is a key leadership skill, and thus taking time to review one's communications strategy and performance is time well spent. Additionally, continually seeking ways to diversify communication ensures that communication means are relevant and reaching a wider audience.

The principal is responsible for setting the big picture. Communication must be seen as a management function, not a set of techniques. S/he must be a role model and champion for good communication. It is essential that words from the school leaders match their actions, that they show commitment to two-way communication, and that they deliver bad news being communicated as effectively as good news. The communication style of the principal should be forthright but tactful.

Principals must realize that their body language, moods and actions convey powerful messages. They must express confidence in their actions and words. Studies suggest that if one appears confident, others are more likely to agree to what one might propose. Conversely the less confident a person appears in his/her own message, the more objections s/he is likely to meet. Additionally, failure to complete or carry out routine tasks suggests that routines are not important. Similarly, failure to follow through on a goal or promise will undermine a person's credibility. Hence, it is essential for a principal to ensure that the link between what one says and does remain close, and if a disparity between them develops for any reason, an explanation is given as to why. A balance must be struck between remaining approachable and "being regarded and consulted as a professional leader with significant knowledge about teaching and learning" (KLP, p. 18). This requires principals to maintain a cheerful demeanor even if the going is tough. The grumpiness of a principal can quickly pervade their school. Principals are public figures under significantly more scrutiny than they were as teachers; as such clarity and transparency, as well as accessibility, are expected and compulsory communication traits.

### **2. How Communication Works**

Communication is the process of successfully transferring information from one entity to another. It is the both the exchange of thoughts, messages or information through verbal, written, oral or non-verbal techniques. Schools should never leave the business of communication to chance and constantly seek new ways to raise their communication awareness. Principals must develop their skills to become effective communicators and learn effective listening and responding techniques. There are six elements to the communication process: the messenger, the message, the medium, the audience, feedback and the situation.

An effective messenger is articulate, knowledgeable, confident, flexible, creative, aware/adaptable, and protocol-sensitive. Messages should be well-introduced, appropriate for audience, concise and precise, and start and end on a positive note. There are different stakeholder engagement approaches that determine the type of medium used to communicate. Each approach is a valid method of stakeholder engagement, but more suited to particular stakeholder types and message. Pull communications are one-way and depend on stakeholders deciding to access the information. At the other end of the pyramid Partnership engagement approaches give shared accountability, decision making, joint learning and actions. Between the two, Push communications is one-way engagement where organization may broadcast information, Consultation allows for involvement, but not responsibility and little influence outside of consultation boundaries, and Partnership which involves shared accountability and responsibility in a particular area/activity.

Depending on the level of engagement the message requires, an engagement approach is chosen, and then a medium. Medium vary from websites or news articles at the Pull end of the spectrum, to face-to-face meetings at the Partnership level. Some Islamic school principals don't realize that even if limited engagement is desired, there are still many media available for communication. It can be argued that especially when limited engagement is desired, strong communication strategies become even more important. Push communication media are easily distributed among school employees and can be standardized so that external stakeholders know what to expect. Consultation and Partnership are also controlled engagement models that have limited responsibility and influence. Principals can easily apply them by establishing task forces, committees, or working with the school's PTO.

There are some basic truths regarding the essence of communication. The first is that hearing something doesn't mean that one is listening and reading something does not mean one understands. It is essential that a messenger check for understanding when the message is an important one. At that moment, and others, it is essential that the messenger also become the listener at times. At those times, it is essential that one forgets preconceptions, keep an open mind, and leave baggage behind. Receiving communication objectively is a sign of respect. When a tone of respect is sent, then it is often reciprocated.

An often underestimated element of communication is non-verbal which can be separated into language and gestures. Language itself is part of non-verbal communication. The choice of when one chooses to speak versus when one is silent gives signals to the receiver. For example, choosing not to respond to work-related phone calls or emails after-hours can give a message of defining personal limits or can indicate a lack of commitment to the job depending on the receiver and the message. A silence in the face of a disturbing statement by another can clearly send the message of disapproval more strongly than words. Hence, silence itself is a very strong communication tool. Gestures also send strong messages. Often, people are not aware of their non-verbal messages. Principals of Islamic schools need to learn to be careful of their facial expression and body language as they are now in the community spotlight.

Discretion is important in all schools; however, as Islamic schools are community schools, discretion is even more important. A principal who earns a reputation as a discreet individual gains trust from the school's stakeholders and also sets the tone for the rest of the school's employees. It is especially important to insist that all staff be discrete. Unlike public schools or most other private schools, many of the families of Islamic schools interact on a social level, together and with school staff. Hence, discussions on teacher performance or compensation, student performance or behavior and financial matters must be appropriately handled. Written communications, such as email, are particularly vulnerable to improper and unauthorized distribution, because they are so easy to forward to others.

### **3. Communicating with Internal Stakeholders**

Communication protocol is dependent on maintaining the school hierarchy. Most Islamic schools have an organizational chart and then a different practice. Internal stakeholders communicate to the person and in the method that will result in the most expedient and favorable response to their need. It is essential to establish and maintain communication procedure on the student, teacher, department, administrative and school levels. It is also

important to review those procedures continually; one method to do so is by surveying internal stakeholders. Another way is to see how often established procedures are by-passed. This is often a signal that the procedure is not efficient. Finally, it is crucial that staff members are held accountable for by-passing established communication protocol. If the procedure is not working, it should be discussed on an administrative level and corrected. The principal must be the first in setting that expectation. For example, in setting up meetings with the principal regarding an academic concern, parents should be first asked if they have spoken with the teacher.

One area of concern for many principals is how to be kept informed without micromanaging. It is important that the principal sets communication protocol to be kept informed. Grade-level, department-level should be set up with teachers and department-level coordinators, administration meetings should be held with all office and reception staff. The principal can receive written reports, verbal reports, or use technological reporting tools. The benefit to technological tools, such as Trello, is two-fold; instant updates as from all coordinators, senior-administrators and office staff as well as being able to use meeting time for driving projects rather than handling small problems. Additionally, a solution like Trello keeps a principal's email uncluttered and offers the ability to collaborate and track issues. Finally, as mentioned, coordinator and senior-administration meetings should be held weekly to keep the core team aligned on strategic plans and current projects. These strategies allow the principal to avoid micromanaging while still be kept informed.

After setting expectations, the principal must also continually adjust the school temperature. When setting expectations, one might consider establishing an internal communication protocol. An example of such would be, "Use your Cs – Compassion, Consistency, Communication, Creativity, and Collaboration." Once done, you can maintain that climate by being an example, using errors as teaching moments, and by adopting a listening approach for successful collaboration and learning. It is also essential for administrators to adopt an analytical ear for the 'sounds' that they want to hear but are absent and hear but would prefer not to hear. Add all these sounds to your knowledge bank about the school and use them at appropriate times to make progress on development. They are often signals of a need to diversify or intensify communication to adjust the school temperature.

#### **4. Communicating with External Stakeholders**

An essential responsibility of Islamic school principals is establishing external stakeholder relationships. As always, *begin with the end in mind*. There are three essential components to such relations. The first is to remember that principals strengthen partnerships and networks to enhance student learning, whether that partnership is with the school board or the local soup kitchen. The second is to extend your knowledge so you become an expert on your school community. Finally, principals share so that education becomes everyone's business. It is recommended to have a broad and simple community communication goal appropriate to your school's setting.

Another important relationship is between the school board and the staff and the school board and the administration. While requires rules of protocol to be observed, communication at this level are less effective if entirely "top-down" and should include teambuilding and appreciation. The principal should be the conduit for strong a staff-board relationship. Effectively communicating the successes and challenges of the staff to the board is central toward building trust and appreciation between them. It also enables the principal to more effectively campaign for the correct resources to support their needs.

One of the core external relationships is the between the parent and the school. Effective family and school collaboration and communication require schools to take responsibility for communication. Such relationships should have three components: general school and class communication, opportunities for involvement, and individual student communications. General school and class communications should be established and sent out at specific intervals and in a specific format. Even social media use should be organized and consistent. Opportunities for involvement can come through the PTO, volunteer hours, and class parent programs. Individual communication should be sent out to point out student strengths as well as areas where improvement is needed. Schools can also hold parent functions such as "Coffee with the Principal" or "Grandparents' Tea".

"The benefits of stakeholder engagement include improved information flows by tapping into local knowledge and having the opportunity to 'road-test' policy initiatives or proposals with stakeholders." (Stakeholder Engagement Framework) Some strategies to begin improving community relationships are: plan for improved communication, set goals based on your strengths and limitations, and to establish priorities. When developing your plan, it is important to teach out to diverse community groups, find information sources, and reach out to community leaders. By doing so, you develop a network. Once you have a plan in place, the

first step is to choose a medium that targets your audience and effectively delivers your message. Finally, an oft-missed last step would be to evaluate the effectiveness of your communication. This allows for better planning and more effective future communication.

### **5. A Board-Principal Communication Model**

Successful principal – board communication is a challenge faced by most Islamic school principals. While regular reporting is important, it is also essential not to over-communicate. Principals should have a clear understanding of what falls under their domain and what is a shared domain. There are two levels of communication: one is planning and the other is practice. Planning communication falls into two categories: long term and short term. It is very important to keep the school's long term plans on the board's agenda and to be proactive in developing short-term plans. Doing so allows for continual alignment. One strategy is to provide high-level updates on school initiatives and explain their connection to the school's long term vision.

Common topics for communication regarding practice are: hiring issues, escalated parent issues, escalated student issues, facility concerns and security concerns. It is highly recommended that principals effectively communicate issues facing the school, even when not requiring board interference. Those issues may be the cause for future actions or proposals that will be better understood with history. When presenting issues it is essential to be solution-oriented.

As board meetings often have long agendas, it is advisable to hold one-on-one discussions. This can provide you with the board's perspective which will enable you to offer feasible solutions. Additionally, sometimes it is useful to use outside subject matter experts (SMEs). Certain issues facing our schools, for example security, are outside the realm of experience of administrators and board members. Using SMEs allows you to make informed recommendations and encourages trust.

One challenge often faced by administrators is how to avoid crises driving your communication with the school board. Often "crises" are a result of a misuse of the communication hierarchy, for example, academic concerns being directly shared with the board and from the board to the principal. By setting and maintaining communication protocol, fewer crises of this kind develop. Remember, however, that you can only maintain the protocol if it is effective. Another way to avoid crises is to stay informed. Again, making sure that you consistently communicate with administrators and coordinators and that they know when to escalate something to you is

important. This is, again, depended on the consistency of the reporting. Finally, at the heart of the board-principal relationship must be trust and the willingness to work as a team. A lack of trust on either end will result in poor communication and a weak relationship with little alignment. Therefore, it behooves the principal to spend time and effort building trust and establishing a strong relationship with his/her board.

### **6. Communicating in Difficult Situations**

Communication in Islamic schools is often one of the most challenging responsibilities. This is because as community schools, most stakeholders interact on a professional as well as a social level. This reality increases the barriers to communication; these blocks may be personal or external factors. External barriers can be: health and physical factors, technical interruptions, environmental factors, and human error. External factors should be corrected immediately if possible. Even more importantly, they should immediately be brought to the awareness of recipients. Personal barriers include, but are not limited to: making assumptions, patterns/reverting to type, the need to be right, and mental/physical attitude. In these cases, remaining unemotional, focusing on the issue, and being non-reactive help. Reflective listening is key here, as is finding the core problem.

As an administrator, there are many difficult conversations you have such as delivering tough news, enforcing policy, developmental feedback, conflicts and disagreements, challenging others on their decisions, discussing compensation, and handling complaints. Remember that effective relationship skills “play an important part in managing conflicts of interest, supporting and challenging teacher practices, and dealing with a range of challenges and situations.” (p.13, KLP.) The most important two factors for success are to have strong relationships and to carefully plan for difficult communications. Initially, consider why you need to have discussion needs to take place. Next, define your goal; what do you hope to achieve? The third and fourth steps are to identify what the critical issues are for you or the school and the benefit of addressing them. The sixth step is to clearly outline why addressing it might be a problem, and specifically, what barriers, personal or external, exist. Finally, to decide on the medium and tone of the communication, how to self-manage your own reactions, and how to respond to the reactions you may receive from the other person.

Reversing the course of an escalating conflict is an important skill to have in these instances. The big idea to remember is to make yourself as non-threatening as possible to the other person. Here, non-verbal body language is important. Some specific steps you can take

are to listen, acknowledge and accept the other person's feelings, apologize for your contribution, control your tone and body language, and focus on the future. Listening is a powerful tool. Failing to listen to people's concerns will cause them to see you as a threat. When you listen to the person's concern, acknowledge and accept the other person's feelings without passing judgement on them. It is important not to deny how another person feels. As very few conflicts are entirely the fault or responsibility of only one party, to de-escalate a conflict, it is important to apologize for your contribution, even if it was unintended. Controlling your tone and body language is essential in these instances. Non-verbal communication accounts for a significant portion of the message people receive from face-to-face communication. If you look threatening, you are threatening. Specific tips are to sit down rather than stand up, keep your arms open and your facial expression neutral. Finally, it will behoove all parties to keep the conversation as focused on the future as possible. Fixating on the past is a guaranteed way to escalate conflicts. When the conversation focuses on the future, both parties are engaged in problem solving rather than fault-finding.

Active listening is an approach used by mental health professionals as well as industry leaders to "building rapport, understanding, and trust" (Grohol, p.1). The three primary steps of active listening are listening for comprehension, retention, and responding. In the listening for comprehension stage, the listener actively analyzes and listens to what the speaker is saying without distraction or thoughts about other topics. Non-verbal cues that show attention are smiling, maintaining eye contact, a forward leaning posture, and avoiding distractions. To show retention, the listener summarizes or paraphrases what the speaker has said. When finally responding, the listener is candid and respectful. (goodtherapy.org)

In conclusion, successful communication strongly impacts school climate. Islamic schools environments are a unique mix of professional and social relationships. In such an environment, a strong communication plan becomes even more essential. It can establish alignment with both internal and external stakeholders and establish expected protocol. It can facilitate effective strategic planning and meetings. Difficult situations can be handled smoothly with strong and careful communication planning. Overall, administrators who are fair, consistent and good communicators set a tone of cordiality and professionalism within the entire school community.

**Works Cited**

"Active Listening." GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog. N.p., 04 Aug. 2015. Web. 07 Nov. 2016.

Grohol, John M. "Become a Better Listener: Active Listening | Psych Central." Psych Central. N.p., 17 July 2016. Web. 07 Nov. 2016. <<http://psychcentral.com/lib/become-a-better-listener-active-listening/>>.

"Kiwi Leadership for Principals / Key Leadership Documents / Leadership Development / Home - Educational Leaders." Educational Leaders News RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Nov. 2016. <<http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Key-leadership-documents/Kiwi-leadership-for-principals>>.

Patterson, Kerry. *Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005. Print.

Stakeholdermap.com., By T Morphy. "Engaging Stakeholders - A Strategy for Stakeholder Engagement." Stakeholdermap.com. N.p., 10 Aug. 2016. Web. 07 Nov. 2016.