

CASE STUDY: IMPORTANCE OF INTERNAL RELATIONS

Buffalo Creek Elementary School, located in an affluent suburb, serves approximately 400 students in kindergarten through Grade 5. Built 9 years ago, the school's enrollment has remained stable since it opened. For the first 8 years, the school had only one principal, Ryan Teeter. Last year, he retired and was replaced by Martha Mays, an experienced administrator who at the time was employed in another state.

Everyone connected with Buffalo Creek Elementary School quickly discovered that Mrs. Mays and Mr. Teeter were dissimilar principals. His leadership style was casual; her style is formal. He spent a considerable amount of time walking around the school talking to staff and students; she spends most of her time in meetings or observing teachers. He preferred to communicate face-to-face; she prefers to use email.

Although Principal Mays was never openly critical of her predecessor, teachers recognized that she did not view him as an effective administrator. During his tenure, for example, Mr. Teeter invited a small group of parents to join him for coffee on the first Tuesday of each month. Held at 9:00 a.m. in the cafeteria, the coffees usually extended through the morning—breaking up only because the first lunch period was near. Although parents occasionally asked questions about their children or the school, the conversations usually related to other topics. Mrs. Mays continued this tradition for only 2 months. Concluding that they were basically a waste of her time, she told the superintendent that parents were more interested in sharing the latest gossip than in talking education.

Relationships between the principal and school employees also changed after Mrs. Mays arrived. She avoided socializing with staff; although she was always respectful, she was not viewed as being friendly. Mr. Teeter went out of his way to praise staff members, even when the accolades were unwarranted. Mrs. Mays was more candid, especially when she believed that staff members were not performing at an acceptable level.

By the second semester, criticisms of Principal Mays began to surface. Teachers accustomed to autonomy were not pleased that she spent so much time in their classrooms. They felt that she was aloof and treated them as subordinates and not as peer professionals. Some of them shared their feelings with influential parents. In early March, officers of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) requested to meet with Principal Mays to discuss morale at the school.

The meeting was held in the principal's office and four parents and one teacher attended. The president of the PTA emphasized that the group was there not to criticize but rather to explore ways to recapture the "family" environment that had existed under the former principal. Mrs. Mays responded that she had no idea what that meant. The PTA president then explained that both teachers and parents had always had an open, friendly relationship with Mr. Teeter. She then told the principal, "This was and is a very good school. We want to make sure that it remains that way. You seem to be changing some things, and we don't know why."

Principal Mays said she would not evaluate her predecessor. She indicated her responsibility as a principal was to be an instructional leader—a role that required her to be immersed in curricular and instructional decisions. In concluding the meeting, she told the others, “Even very good schools can become better, and that is what I intend to accomplish. Thank you for sharing your feelings, but I remain comfortable with my actions since becoming principal of this school.”

INTRODUCTION

The term *public relations* often is interpreted and applied narrowly to include only those relationships between an organization and its relevant external publics (e.g., the relationships that administrators have with parents and other community stakeholders). In fact, PR also has an intraorganizational dimension that encompasses the relationships that administrators have with staff and students. All relationships, however, are affected by the degree to which administrators engage in interpersonal communication to exchange influence, mutually set behavioral norms, and ensure mutual benefits (Berko, Rosenfeld, & Samovar, 1997).

As the opening case study demonstrates, the inability or unwillingness to engage in interpersonal communication can produce problems, even for administrators who may appear to be effective instructional leaders. Poor relationships between administrators and others often stem from a lack of communicative knowledge and skills; however, they also can be caused by an unwillingness to apply these assets to forge relationships (Kowalski, 2005). This point cannot be overstated because poor relationships are a common reason for administrator dismissal (Davis, 1998).

This chapter examines communicative competence and conflict resolution, especially with respect to building and maintaining relationships. In many ways, the two subjects are intertwined; for example, poor communication is a common cause of conflict.

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- ◆ Identify the basic elements of communication.
- ◆ Define good listening skills.
- ◆ Describe the nature and importance of nonverbal communication.
- ◆ Differentiate between formal and informal communication networks.
- ◆ Define relational communication.
- ◆ Explain the nexus between communication competence and relationships.
- ◆ Describe basic types of conflict found in schools.
- ◆ Identify conflict contaminants within districts and schools.
- ◆ Identify and describe conflict resolution strategies.