

Communicating from the Eye of the Perfect Storm

Reflections on the changing role of the school communications professional

By Tom DeLapp, President, Communication Resources for Schools

Public education and the communication professionals that serve in it are in the middle of the “perfect storm,” according to CalSPRA past president Tom DeLapp. In his Thursday evening keynote address, DeLapp said that the triple threat of dwindling resources, growing parental consumerism and the accountability movement are pressurizing the education system like never before. Amidst all of this seeming chaos and tension, he urged school communicators to be their school district’s compass and early warning system. Here are Tom’s ten tips for riding out the perfect storm as a school communicator.

1. **Position Yourself as the chief communications officer of your district**

Get your organization to recognize you as the crossroads, clearinghouse and channel for all district communications and public relations. You need to be at the table when critical decisions are made just like the chief business official and the chief educational officer. Now is not the time cocoon yourself and ride out the storm. Now is the time to become a visible resource for the district.

2. **Define “accountability” as part of your job**

Put it into your job description! Too often school PR people see themselves as apologists or cheerleaders. We need to show our stakeholders the bottom line in terms that they will understand and appreciate. We need to be the ambassadors for accountability inside and outside of the schools. Define success in your schools by showing that it didn’t just happen. People, plans and programs made achievement improve.

3. **Paint a portrait of your district**

One of the biggest problems facing schools is that the people inside are getting tired, frustrated and overwhelmed. When our own staff and parents feel disconnected they become discontented. Our job is to always paint the big picture so people can see how they fit into it. To do that we need to become message makers who articulate the vision of the system’s leaders. We need to help our school districts “brand” themselves so we can demonstrate “public value.”

4. **Be a communications model**

School PR people need to become public relations teachers for their districts. Most school people don’t understand the powerful ways they can shape public attitudes. We need to model effective communication in everything we do. Specifically, we need to watch ourselves to make sure we don’t engage in negative talk that contributes to a climate of complaints.

5. **Be your district’s listening post**

A good communicator spends at least half of his or her time listening. One of the best ways you can prove your indispensability is to be a leader in getting your schools to listen more to stakeholders. Be the architect of a public engagement and strategic listening program in your schools. This helps you be responsive and avoid listening only to the loudest voice in the room.

6. **Make it count in a crisis**

Ask yourself this question: “When it really matters, am I in the room?” The Chinese symbol for crisis is a blend of the symbols Wei for danger, and Ji for opportunity. A crisis is a test for the district and you. Your response in a high profile incident or situation can be your finest hour. Be recognized as the “go-to” person when times get tough!

7. **Be the visible spokesperson**

Most PR people downplay being in the spotlight. We promote visibility for others. But even if you’re not the star, make sure everybody knows you’re the director. Be the visible face and voice of the district.

8. **Assess your work’s value**

In the era of accountability and tight budgets we need to define the value of what we do. Conduct your own communications audit. Zero base budget your own operation and put a dollar figure on your impact to the district. Produce a quarterly report on You. In a results environment, prove your worth. Don’t just do stuff, have a plan. Are you surprised by what you do each day? Keep in mind, people can’t judge if you’re successful if they don’t know what to expect from you. Don’t practice ready, fire, aim! Have a plan. Otherwise, you’re going to PR all over everything.

9. **Be value-added for your boss**

Being the ultimate generalist can mean that people generally don’t know what you do. Show that you are thinking ahead. Be a troubleshooter and the superintendent’s early warning system. If you want to be “cabinet level” then remember this: you aren’t a director if you have to be directed. So be “surprising” and exceed expectations. Find out where help is needed most, then provide it.

10. Treat yourself as a client

Have clear personal goals for your career and job. Take yourself on a retreat to figure where you're going and how you've going to get there. Build personal bridges and relationships with key communicators, influentials and leaders in your community because you are known for the company you keep. Another important rule of thumb: You are what you do every day. If you come in and answer parent phone calls all day then you are a receptionist. Walk your talk and take stock of where you are. Ask yourself these questions. Am I: Doing things right, or doing the right things? Focused on core issues in my daily work? Following a communications mission statement? Worried about producing things or strengthening perceptions and processes? Practicing strategic communications? A planner or a pawn? The communications compass for your district?

At the end of the day you should be able to positively answer these questions:

Are schools better because of your work? Have you helped expand their capacity to succeed? Are stakeholders better connected? Is your personal and district reputation improved? Would they really miss you if you were gone?

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