

Infusing media training into a course in school-community relations

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Abstract

Both ISLLC (Standard 4) and ELCC (Elements 1.5, 4.1) emphasize the importance of school-community relations in advanced leadership programs and as an element of effective school leadership. The inclusion of such standards is based on the notion that schools that communicate effectively and maintain good relations with the community are likely to receive the support of the community. One way to help ensure effective communications by school leaders is to ensure that they have the necessary skills to effectively communicate with the public (Fiore, 2006). This article discusses an approach one professor uses in aiding aspiring superintendents in becoming more media savvy.

Introduction

One of the courses required for superintendent certification in Texas is school-community relations. As a concept and standard, school-community relations is also required by ELCC (Elements 1.5, 4.1, 2002, p.9, 11) and ISLLC (Standard 4, 1996, p.16). Both the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) **and** the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) recognize the importance of including school-community relations as a standard for effective leaders and a standard for advanced programs in educational leadership, respectively. Both initiatives also underscore the belief that the effectiveness of schools and school leaders is linked directly to the type and quality of relations that exist between the school (along with its leadership) and the community. Moreover, the relationship between the school and the community, ideally, is non-dichotomous and non-adversarial. Rather, the relationship should be a healthy symbiotic and interdependent co-existence that results in healthy communities and high achieving schools. In fact, it would be accurate to assert that good schools are the product of and producers of good communities; and good communities are the product of and producers of good schools.

Without the support of the community, schools cannot perform their primary function - educating children. The more the community knows about what the schools do, the more likely the community will support the schools (Bagin, 2001). Whenever the trust level and lines of communications between the school and the community are breached or non-existent, the school's ability to perform its primary function is seriously diminished. In terms of efficiency alone, maintaining good school-community relations is preferable to fixing or repairing broken relations. Therefore, it is critically important for school leaders to do their best in creating and fostering good relations with the entire community (Fiore, 2006).

Media Training Model

One of the ways to accomplish this goal is to be effective in using the mass media to communicate with the public. When I teach the course in school-community relations, I make an effort to teach and demonstrate to students how to effectively utilize the media as a resource and vehicle for communicating with the public, the primary purpose of

which is to inform, educate, and enlist the support of the public in achieving the goals of the school. As such, one of the primary objectives of the course is to provide students the media relations training that will enable them to effectively communicate with their internal and external publics via the electronic and print media.

As the school district leader, the superintendent (depending on the size and administrative structure of the district) is likely to be asked to speak on camera or to grant newspaper interviews regarding some issue that may be positive or negative. Additionally, the issue *du jour* may be directly related to the local community or it may be some state-wide or national issue that has critical local implications, such as No Child Left Behind, school safety, or inappropriate teacher-student relationships. The public rightly assumes that the superintendent is an expert in the field of education, regardless of the issue and often assumes, rightly or wrongly, that the superintendent has expertise in communicating to the public his/her thoughts via the mass media.

In my course, we endeavor to ensure that the students meet or exceed the expectations that the public has about their ability to communicate effectively via the mass media. The impetus for focusing attention on media training came when I taught the course for the first time. I asked students, all aspiring superintendents, how many had ever received media training. No one raised his/her hand. When asked how many felt comfortable in dealing with the media, again no one raised his/her hand. We all agreed that we would attempt to rectify that situation. I made modifications in the course outline and placed additional emphasis on media training and preparation. As one who has had media training and experience in communicating publicly through the media, I knew the importance of possessing communications skills and knowledge that will be seen, read and judged through camera lenses and written quotes in the newspaper by a host of stakeholders.

As the media training portion of the course took on greater importance in the course, students gradually embraced the new direction the course was taking, while acknowledging being anxious and excited about learning something new. Despite the uncertainties that accompany new learning, the students believed that media training would likely benefit them as they advanced in their careers as superintendents and educational leaders. The presentation of media training followed a logical sequence.

1. With no warning or preparation time, each student, individually, was asked to stand before a camera and take questions from "reporters". They were not given advance notice of the topic and had not yet received any media training. The intent was for them to experience a live press conference in front of a pool of reporters, with no preparation.
2. After they viewed themselves on tape, a critique was provided. From the critique there were multiple teaching moments and a list of DOs and DON'Ts.

DOs and DON'Ts and Teachable Moments

- Be skeptical when a reporter assures you that your comments are off the record. Be even more suspicious if the reporter says nothing at all about whether your comments will be on or off the record. A reporter's job is to get the facts and present the story. Vigilant reporters are duty-bound to seek out any comments that will help him/her get the facts and present the story to the public. Generally, most reporters operate with a sound code of ethics. The following anecdote, however, illustrates how some reporters might

choose to contextualize their code of ethics. A new school board member in my community had a social relationship with the local newspaper publisher, who was also a reporter for the newspaper. While having a lunch with his newspaper publisher friend, the board member pointed out what he thought were deficiencies in the school district and what should be done to correct them. To his surprise, the board member read his comments in the next edition of the newspaper. What he thought was an off-the-record discussion with his friend became fodder for a controversial news story. A reporter's job is to print or report a story, even if they choose to contextualize their code of ethics. If you do not want to become the story, understand that in most situations, there is no such thing as off the record.

- The public is more apt to judge you on how you look and sound than on what you say. Be accurate and authoritative any way because what you say will last in perpetuity. I emphasize to my students that rarely do we get a second chance to make a first impression. So, try to make a good first impression.
- Given the relative brief air time and limited column space available in most newspapers and newscasts, your comments will be edited for sound bites or headline "grabbers". Do not be surprised if most of your comments are omitted altogether. Also, remember that a dominant ethos in the media is that "if it bleeds it leads". At a university where I once worked, there was a shooting involving students from rival fraternities. Fortunately, no one was injured. A reporter, from a near-by large metropolitan area, called the University's public relations office to find out if there were any injuries. After learning that there were none, the reporter decided that there was no story since there was no bloodshed. On the one hand, that was good news for the University. On another, it lent credence to the adage, if it bleeds it leads.
- Avoid wearing clanging jewelry that can be picked up by very sensitive microphones. That can be very distracting to the listener. One student wore bracelets that made very loud contact with the podium throughout the mock press conference. Everyone in class was very surprised at how distracting the clanging jewelry sounded after they reviewed her tape. They realized how much distractions can negatively impact the message and even embarrass the messenger.
- Never say, no comment. Instead, say that you will get back to them when you have more information. If you know the answer, give a clear, concise, direct response. Avoid adding extraneous and irrelevant information, which could lead the interview in a direction you do not want it to go or give the impression that you are not sure of yourself or your comments. One student in my class was prompted to respond to a particular question that would normally not elicit a controversial response. The student viewed the prompt as an opportunity to express his disagreement with the state's

testing program. The “reporter” managed to guide the student down a path of unrehearsed, off-the-cuff rants that could have easily become an eye-catching headline, which would have created unwelcomed publicity for the school district.

- Always have one or two central points you want to make, and repeat them often. For example, following a violent incident among students from rival schools, as often as you can, repeat the following refrain: *Maintaining the safety and security of all of our students and staff is our utmost concern at all times*. That reassures worried parents and staff that you understand and care about their worries. Another goal of having one or two core messages that you want to convey is to establish and maintain control and direction of the interview. You want to convey a message; and you want to stay focused on that message by striking a delicate balance between guiding and being guided by the interviewer. Politicians and experienced, media savvy public figures are very skillful in guiding an interview. Typically, they do so by constantly repeating the central message they want to convey, even if their message is only tangentially related to the reporter's question.
- If you do not know the answer to a reporter's question, be honest and say so. Tell the reporter that you will research the question and get back to him/her. Follow up with a response in a timely manner. If it is going to take longer than expected, inform the reporter. You do not want to appear evasive.
- Develop a mutually beneficial working relationship with the local media representatives. From such a relationship comes trust and credibility. Both are essential in enlisting the support of the media in conveying your message to the public.

3. After ample time has been provided for practice and improvement, typically a few weeks later, a final videotape is completed. This time students are asked to come to class dressed as superintendents and school leaders. I want the students to take on the role of superintendent in appearance, thought, and behavior. Part of the challenge in educational leadership preparation is to get the students to think and behave like superintendents and not like teachers and principals. I believe this activity helps them to do so.

4. They are sequestered in an adjoining classroom. Each student comes to the interview room unsure of the topic or issue that will be covered in the interview. I introduce the student/superintendent to the pool of reporters, who immediately begin to ask questions about the topic or issue. The camera lights are shining brightly and the camera is rolling. For the next ten minutes the student is the center of attention as superintendent, who must provide responses to a series of rapid-fire questions from both print and electronic media reporters. The student is given written and verbal feedback by the professor and the reporters, who are actually resource persons from the local and area media. At a later time, the student views the tape,

giving particular attention to the feedback that he/she received from the professor and the reporters.

Conclusion

By the end of the term, students will have added something very valuable to their repertoire of skills. As school and school district leaders, they will possess the skills and knowledge needed to effectively utilize the mass media to convey their messages to the public. They will also fully understand that unless they are effective in utilizing the media as vehicle for communicating to the public, the public will not fully appreciate their efforts in achieving the school's primary objective - providing the best education possible for the children of the district.

References

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