

The People Skills

*Always do right. This will gratify some people, and
astonish the rest.*

Mark Twain
To the *Young People's Society*
Greenpoint Presbyterian Church,
Brooklyn (February 16, 1901)

The principal's work does not fit into handy compartments. In fact, there are significant overlaps in the many aspects of the job. The principalship is about working with people. To effectively work with the many individuals associated with a school, the principal must demonstrate highly refined people skills.

2 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

Principals describe the people skills—interpersonal relations and communication skills—as most important to their work and their success. The people skills provide the means to accomplish the extensive array of tasks that are the principal’s responsibility. For this reason, mistakes related to people skills are presented first. The mistakes are followed by a discussion and suggestions for avoiding them.

Mistake 1

Interpersonal Shortcomings

Skilled principals recognize their importance to the positive culture of a school. They understand that greeting teachers, recognizing the efforts of all, and treating everyone equitably are standards in their interpersonal skills repertoire.

The school is people. Without a network of positive relationships, the work of the school cannot be accomplished. It is through the principal’s leadership and interpersonal skills that excellent schools are created.

Scenario 1: Forgetting to Say Hello

Teachers reported that the principal does not visit classrooms except during appraisal years. They noted that they do not see the principal in the halls, and they wonder if she cares what is going on in the classrooms. They report frustration because she does not meet or consult with them. Their point of view does not seem to matter. They said, “She could at least make a point of saying ‘Hello.’”

Rx: Successful principals excel in the fine art of meeting and greeting people. A first step for this principal is to approach the teachers and staff members, acknowledge the oversight, and apologize for it (Blanchard & McBride, 2003). This action will demonstrate the principal’s care, concern, and honesty. It will demonstrate her leadership.

A daily routine of greeting the teachers and support staff is essential to prevent the problem described here. The interpersonal aspects of the job have to come first.

In schools where enrollment is high and administrators are few, it may be difficult for principals to be in all the places they should. Often teachers are ignored. Those who are ignored may be the most experienced or the most competent teachers. The principal assumes that they are doing fine and that they do not need assistance. The truth is that even the best and the brightest teachers want to be acknowledged. Being overlooked is possibly an implicit compliment, but teachers do not perceive it that way. Instead, teachers who describe not being acknowledged may be uncertain about the principal's care. The principal must greet staff members daily and recognize staff accomplishments. There is no substitute for treating each staff member as a valued member of the school. Only the principal can create this culture of care in a school.

Caring leadership builds a learning community that includes everyone involved with a school. Caring affects, and some say determines, the degree of learning in schools (Barth, 1990; Caine & Caine, 1991, 1997; Damasio, 1994; Elias et al., 1997; Greenspan, 1997; Jensen, 1998; LeDoux, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1994; Sylwester, 1995) (as cited in Lyman, 2000).

The following list of common practices of caring leadership represents how principals at all levels have led schools to become more caring communities:

1. Articulating values that support caring.
 - a. Caring is important in and of itself.
 - b. All persons deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.
 - c. High expectations for learning and achievement are essential.
 - d. Treat students as you would your own children.

4 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

2. Embracing and viewing positively the complexity of difficult situations.
3. Bringing conflict to the surface for constructive handling.
4. Creating participatory approaches to decision making and problem solving.
5. Acknowledging and valuing the reality of diversity.
6. Being flexible in interpreting and enforcing rules and policies.
7. Restructuring to support caring and create community.
8. Inviting partnership with parents in the education of their children.
9. Modeling caring in culturally meaningful ways.
10. Demonstrating commitment over time. (Lyman, 2000, p. 139)

Principals must plan and schedule their days so that they achieve their goals. There are many distractions in a school day. A principal without a plan will find that days seem to evaporate with little to show for hours of effort.

Leaders make plans, establish goals, and are persistent in their commitment to achieving those goals (Grady & LeSourd, 1990). Leaders can account for their time and can document their accomplishments. "Leaders . . . are 'outer-directed.' They go toward potential followers, cultivate them, satisfy their needs. They show a 'healthy' openness to others' concerns; they give up their own project's schedule to accommodate others' demands" (Wills, 1994, p. 161).

Teachers need to be recognized and appreciated. When a principal ignores the teachers, they are cut off from meaningful contact with the key decision maker in the school. The teachers' voice is silenced. Issues, concerns, problems, challenges, innovation, creativity, and excitement are all

suppressed. The interactions about teaching and learning are lost. Teachers' professional growth and development is thwarted. The ultimate "loser" will be the students. As the teachers are diminished by this principal's mistake, they will lose their enthusiasm for their work with students.

Principals should strive to create an enthusiastic teaching force that is recognized and rewarded for its accomplishments. Principals need to stimulate discussions about teaching and learning so that all the staff's focus is on their most important work in the school. Synergy is the ideal in the school setting. By forging relationships with all the individuals involved in teaching, the knowledge of all the professionals is brought to the discussion.

Scenario 2: The Cold Fish

The principal never recognized the work of teachers. The teachers said they never heard any praise for their work with students or for their personal accomplishments. Teachers received special awards and recognition, and the principal did not acknowledge them. She does not pay attention to all the good people and all the good things that happen in the school.

The principal has shown no interest in getting to know the staff. She has not taken an interest in getting to know what the teachers are doing. It is the same for the students, parents, and community. She makes no effort to connect with them. When the bell rings, she is gone. This makes communication really difficult. She does not live in the community. Her lack of interest and involvement is apparent.

Rx: Principals are often amazed when they discover how important they are to teachers. The principal's attention is a source of satisfaction for teachers. Although one may assume that teachers, as adult professionals, should be able to experience their own self-actualization on the job, in fact teachers look to the principal-leader for direction and support.

6 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

Principals should keep in mind the basics of *The Greatest Management Principle in the World*:

1. The things that get rewarded get done.
2. If you aren't getting the results you want, ask the magic question: "What's being rewarded?" (LeBoeuf, 1985, p. 7)

Recognizing the accomplishments of teachers has benefits for the entire school. Frequent celebrations and recognitions create a climate of accomplishment and progress. According to Conradt (2001),

The simple lesson to be learned from the whale trainers is to *overcelebrate*. Make a big deal out of the good and little stuff that we want consistently. Second, *undercriticize*. People know when they screw up. What they need is help. If we undercriticize, punish, and discipline less than is expected, people will not forget the event and usually will not repeat it. (p. 93)

Student, teacher, and school accomplishments should be heralded by the principal. By these leadership actions, a principal can transform the climate of a school. By verbalizing and demonstrating what they believe, and by sharing their passion for providing a positive learning experience for students, principals shape their schools' cultures (Haar 2002a; 2002b).

Celebrating accomplishments and rewarding those who merit notice are part of the leadership challenge described by Kouzes and Posner (2002). The work of the principal often focuses on problems and crises and the "good stuff" is neglected. Principals are overwhelmed by constant telephone calls and people who "drop by" with questions and concerns. Entire days can be consumed in responding to these issues.

The principal's role is to let staff members know how well they are doing their jobs. "Effective school leaders give plenty of timely positive feedback. They give negative feedback

privately without anger or personal attack, and they accept criticism without becoming defensive" (Irmsher, 1996, p. 1).

The principal needs to adopt a practice of setting aside time each day to recognize individual accomplishments. "The number one motivator of people is feedback on results . . . Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions" (Blanchard & Johnson, 1983, p. 67). Writing congratulatory notes or personally complimenting individuals only takes a few minutes. Recognizing accomplishments must be a planned part of each day. If it is left to chance, it will not happen. Principals who focus on establishing a positive school culture make recognizing and celebrating individual accomplishments a priority.

This unfortunate scenario may characterize a principal who has only a short-term interest in this position. Individuals who take positions knowing that they will be short term may not be motivated to get to know the faculty and students. This is a mistake because the teachers and students are the core of the school.

This principal's behavior may be the result of her perceptions of her role. "Isolation comes with increasing power or prestige. This can breed arrogance, as truth and sharing suffer when others are not willing to speak up to us or to correct our errors" (Carter, 1996, p. 96). Perhaps this principal has an inflated sense of her power and prestige.

The principal's job is not a "9 to 5" position. The principal's day does not end when the students leave. The principal is the principal 24 hours a day.

The teachers in this scenario clearly identify the principal's deficits. The teachers know that in a school "we feel differently about enthusiastic, growth-oriented, cheerful individuals. We gravitate to them, enjoy their company, and try to emulate them. These natural leaders share six characteristics: They know themselves, like themselves, take control, demonstrate flexibility, accept reality, and live fully" (Krupp, 1994, p. 27). Each school should have this type of individual as principal. Fortunately, many schools do.

8 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

The principal is a very visible member of a community. In some communities, the principal is one of the highest paid community members. The community expects to have access to the principal. They, in fact, may behave as though they “own the principal.” Community members want contact with the principal. When the principal does not live in the community, community members may resent the principal’s absence.

Principals who live in communities other than where their schools are located sacrifice a major link to the individuals they serve. Community support of the school and the school’s activities is essential for success. The extra time that principals invest in being available for conversations with the public is time well spent.

Scenario 3: Playing Favorites

The principal grants special privileges to some teachers and not to others. Some teachers are allowed to leave school during the day on a regular basis—others are never allowed to leave.

The principal plays favorites all the time. She’s constantly visiting with her special friends, laughing and having a grand time. Other teachers who are not her “favorites” are ignored.

Rx: “The most important single ingredient in the formula of success is knowing how to get along with people.” (Theodore Roosevelt, cited in Maxwell, 1999, p. 103). “Playing favorites,” which is suggested in this scenario, is a major mistake. No one benefits from a principal’s inequitable treatment of teachers, students, or parents. The principal’s fickleness makes the school environment unpredictable and uncomfortable. Even those who benefit from favoritism recognize the inequities.

Most principals recognize that they must be paragons of equity in a school. All the teachers and support staff seek the attention of the principal and there is no room for favoritism. Favoritism isolates individuals and divides the faculty and staff into the “haves” and “have nots”—those who have the

principal's attention and those who do not have the principal's attention. Instead, the principal should be working to establish a strong sense of community and ownership of the school's program. Cliques and factions do not contribute to a positive school culture.

Principals who build their friendship networks at school with students, faculty, and teachers often tie themselves to personal relationships that thwart their ability to make sound professional decisions. Students, teachers, and parents are not the principal's peers. The principal is bound with the teachers, students, and parents by a series of authority relationships. The principal is, first and foremost, the school leader. Personal relationships or favoritism should not be the basis for the principal's decisions. Principals should focus on Eskelin's (2001) "Reminders for Leaders Who Love (Ten Valuable Keys)":

- Realize that strong relationships are primary.
- Learn to truly "understand" others.
- Relationships begin at home.
- Build alliances based on principles.
- Set an example that backs up your words.
- Create an "open door" environment.
- Demonstrate personal and professional courtesy.
- Realize that change requires connection.
- Never betray a confidence.
- Stay connected—no matter what! (pp. 126–127)

Scenario 4: The Invisible Woman

The teachers described the principal as "public relations ignorant." They said she does not want to get out there in the public eye. She is not prominent at athletic events or concerts. She is almost invisible. They noted that she does not sponsor community meetings or the monthly coffees to visit with the community. She has not built a working relationship with the local newspaper. Even though the teachers provide information about special activities and student accomplishments, the principal does nothing with it.

10 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

Rx: Building relationships with the school community takes careful planning and persistence. National demographics indicate that only a small percentage of a community has children in school; yet, the school is supported by the entire community. When the community has little opportunity for involvement or discussion about the school, then strong community support for the school cannot be expected. In times of scarce resources, school funding can decline when principals have failed to build community ownership of schools.

If parents do not know about a school's problems, they cannot contribute their considerable energy and resources—their power—to resolving them. At the same time, trust must be developed between parents and educators to reduce the likelihood of each blaming the other for the problems. (Giles, 1998, p. 2)

The principal must arrange community meetings and discussions. These opportunities must occur regularly so that the principal has current and accurate information about community issues and concerns. Resource A suggests opportunities for building visibility in the community.

Remember, the principal represents the school to the community and is the first point of contact with the school. "Shared information not only can provide parents with insights regarding ways of helping their children, but also can provide school personnel with ideas to help parents to help their children" (Drake & Roe, 2003, p. 68).

The principal's job extends beyond the typical "9 to 5" workday. Supervision of activities and presence at an endless array of events are essential and expected roles for a principal. The principal is responsible for supervision at certain after-school events; and more importantly, the principal's presence at these events is an important public relations function. The opportunities these activities provide to build strong relationships with students, teachers, and parents are extremely valuable. Extracurricular activities provide access to a wide array of individuals who are concerned about the school. The

principal should use these opportunities to meet people and promote the positive image of the school. Much can be accomplished during brief visits with the public.

Attendance at extracurricular events demonstrates interest and support for these school activities. People notice if the principal attends basketball games but does not attend school plays. Different parents and community members have different interests. The principal needs the opportunity to meet as many people as possible at a variety of events.

Newspaper coverage benefits the students and the school. Making the students' and the school's accomplishments known to the public helps to build a strong, positive perception of the school. "Nothing is more important to parents than their child, and they take pride in seeing their child's name in print" (Hines, 1993, p. 46). When resources are scarce, community perceptions will shape the discussions about school funding.

Parents and community members take pride in the accomplishments of the school and the students. The principal is the chief purveyor of the positive news from the school. If the principal lacks the time to attend to this important task, the responsibility for providing information to the local media should be delegated. The school and the community suffer when the school's activities are not part of the good news.

Mistake 2

Communication Flaws

Communication skills include those that are verbal, non-verbal, aural, and written. Successful principals strive to use these skills consistently and to further develop them whenever possible. Through these skills, "what matters" is made known to all.

The difference between principals who are leaders and those who are not is often linked to their communication skills. Leaders know how to communicate their goals. Only by

12 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

making the goals known to all can principals expect to achieve those goals. Clear communication is the key.

Scenario 5: Open the Door

When the principal is here, his door is usually closed. We have no access to him. Maybe he has things to do, but teachers only have a few minutes each day to visit with the principal.

Rx: Many principals make a habit of greeting teachers every day. By establishing a routine, the staff can count on having access to the principal during specific times. Before school starts, during passing periods, at lunch time, or immediately after school may be the ideal times for the principal to be visible and available. Resource B provides a verbal skill self-assessment.

Principals should vary the times or class periods when they are gone. If the principal always goes to lunch at the same time, then teachers who have preparation periods during that time may never be able to meet with the principal. An undercurrent of discontent can develop when teachers sense that they do not have access to the principal.

A weekly schedule that lists staff and administrator meetings would help reduce the concerns about the principal's absences. The schedule would document that the principal is not absent but attending a meeting.

Principals should monitor their absences to ensure that activities extraneous to the school's program do not take precedence over the school. The principal should be attentive to "false" messages that may be given to the public when the principal is absent from the building, since the principal's absence may be perceived as a lack of attention to the school.

Excessive absences may suggest that a principal does not take the work of the school seriously. A negative example to the faculty may create a culture where attendance and punctuality are perceived as unimportant. The victims will be the students who rely on the teachers' and the principal's attention.

This scenario poses one of the many “Achilles’ heels” of the principalship. A principal could be at school 24 hours a day and people would still complain.

Teachers need to have access to the principal. The secretary is a key resource in communicating with people who want to see the principal. A secretary who is skilled in interpersonal relations can reduce the frustration of individuals who find the principal unavailable. The principal and the secretary can reduce the frustration of the faculty by letting the teachers know when out-of-the-building meetings occur.

Teacher frustration should be kept to a minimum since it can contaminate a positive school culture. Being aware of teachers’ perceptions of the school should be one of the principal’s goals. Often, minor adjustments in practices can reduce the concerns described in this scenario.

The Principal Access Self-Assessment (see Resource C) provides an opportunity to reflect on personal behavior and practices. Based on the results of the assessment, goals for improvement can be specified.

Scenario 6: Secretary Snicker

The principal could not write a logical sentence. His spelling was atrocious, his grammar was worse. He would write letters to the parents that made him look illiterate. The secretary never corrected them. She thought the principal was a jerk and she was not interested in helping him.

Rx: Poor spelling and grammar skills can be compensated for by the assistance of competent professionals or the computer software that is available. The first challenge for the principal is recognizing that he has a writing problem.

As the principal enlists assistance with the problem, Duggan’s (1997) “10 Steps to Effective Written Communication” should be used to guide the communication process:

14 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

1. Communicate with regularity.
2. Use correct spelling and grammar . . . proofread all communications before they are sent home.
3. Consider the audience . . . be careful not to condescend.
4. Stay positive . . . take time to compose a calm, rational letter.
5. Be direct . . . set apart important information in a list format to ensure the best result.
6. Always make and keep a copy . . . duplicates can be worth their weight in copy paper when documentation is needed on a growing behavior problem.
7. Keep it brief.
8. Use humor when appropriate.
9. Communicate partnership.
10. Don't hide behind a letter. Nothing replaces face-to-face communication. Letters are time effective because they reach a large group of people with a small amount of time invested, or they address subjects that don't require an in-person meeting at the moment. (pp. 4-6)

Extra attention should be given to the proofreading step. A qualified, trustworthy person will be needed to assist with this task.

The principal also needs to address the issue of loyalty with the secretary. The secretary described in this scenario does not appear to want to work with the principal. The principal must confront the secretary, discuss the secretary's behavior, and resolve the difficulty.

Referent power depends on personal loyalty to the principal, a loyalty that grows over a relatively long period of time. The development of loyalty to a principal is a social exchange process that is improved when the principal

demonstrates concern, trust, and affection for faculty and staff. Such acceptance and confidence promote good will and identification with the principal that in turn creates strong loyalty and commitment (Hoy & Miskel, 2000). The principal must work to create a school culture that is recognizable by the loyalty and commitment that are displayed throughout the school.

Scenario 7: Fear of Groups

The teachers said the principal was threatened in group meetings. He cannot dominate or control the discussions. His solution is to simply not have meetings. He may talk to faculty members one-to-one, but we never are given the chance to hear each other's points of view. We feel isolated because of his inability to work with a group.

Ry: Successful principals know that full communication is best. All parties need to speak and be heard, as well as to hear the perspectives of their colleagues. When full communication occurs, all perspectives are heard and the decisions that are reached and the understandings that emerge reflect synergy (See Figure 1.1).

Individuals who lack competence or confidence may be very uneasy when full communication occurs. Their reluctance to allow the free exchange of information deprives the faculty of the knowledge that resides in the school. The process of isolating faculty and consulting with them privately fragments the faculty, contributes to a climate of misinformation, and creates an information vacuum. Figure 1.2 illustrates the isolation and limits to communication that occur when the principal does not encourage the dynamic conversation illustrated in Figure 1.1.

By isolating the teachers from one another, the principal may be attempting to maintain power or control over the group. This behavior does not strengthen the school, the teachers, or the instruction that occurs in the school.

If the principal fails to build a strong, cohesive group that is capable of communicating about the school's program, then

16 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

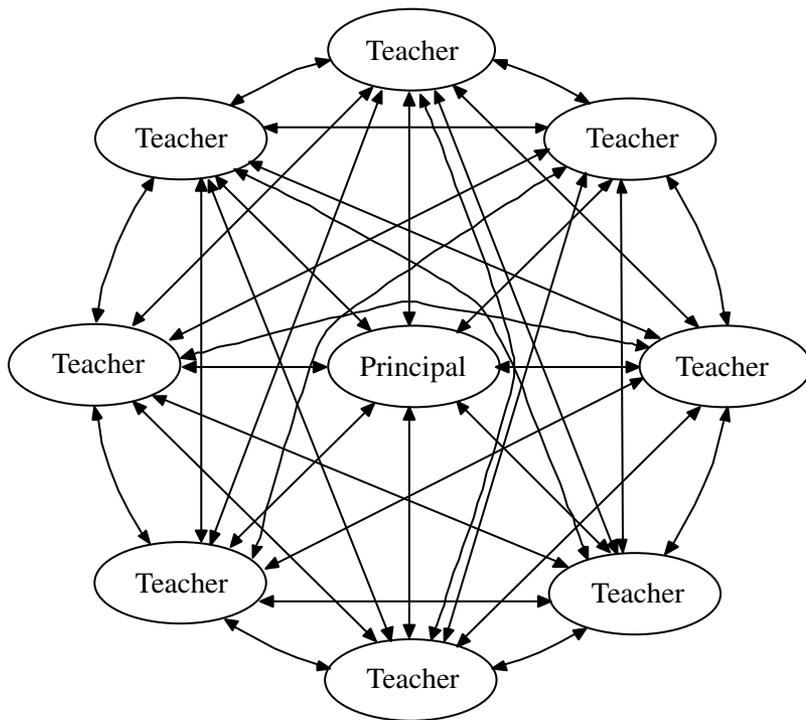


Figure 1.1 Full Communication \Rightarrow Synergy

the goals of the school become unclear to the teachers. Goal displacement occurs. "Faculty may become so rule-oriented that they forget that the rules and regulations are means to achieve goals, *not* ends in themselves" (Hoy & Miskel, 2000, p. 107). Ambiguity prevails. Little is accomplished. Teachers resent the enforced isolation caused by a principal's unwillingness, inability, or fear of drawing a group together.

Scenario 8: Strong Undercurrent

Many of the teachers in the building have worked together for their entire careers. Certain groups of these teachers are pretty powerful. The principal does not pay enough attention to the groups. He does not listen to their concerns. The undercurrent against him is pretty strong.

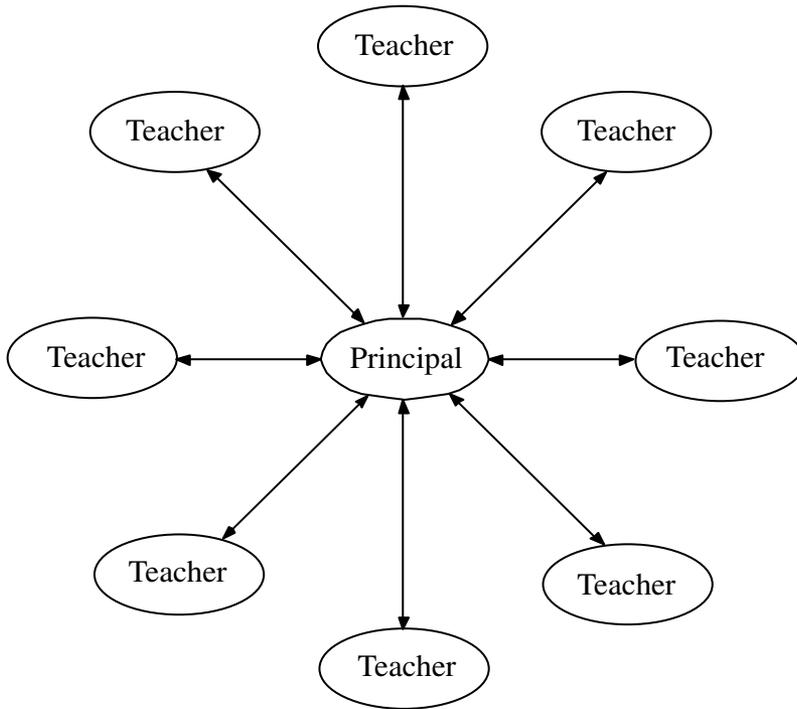


Figure 1.2 One-to-One Communication \Rightarrow Isolation

Rx: “Ignorance is bliss” is not a good school philosophy. By failing to acknowledge teacher groups and their strengths and concerns, the principal is abdicating authority. The principal needs to build strong relationships with the teachers to accomplish the work of the school. If the principal does not build support within the faculty, the principal’s directives and initiatives will be passively ignored. The principal’s authority will be undermined.

The culture of a school is a vibrant dynamic. It is a system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time. A strong culture enables people to feel better about what they do, so they are more likely to work harder (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

A principal such as this one, who is figuratively “sleeping on the job,” should beware. Negative teacher attitudes against

18 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

the principal divert attention from the central goals of teaching and learning. The students' needs should be the most important concerns of the teachers and the principal.

The principal needs to engage with the teachers. Regular meetings should be held during which teachers' perspectives are explored.

The principal should be vigilant so that Charan's (2002) "Dialogue Killers" do not drain the teachers' energies during the meetings. The "Dialogue Killers" follow:

- *Dangling Dialogue.* Confusion prevails. The meeting ends without a clear next step.
- *Information Clogs.* Failure to get all the relevant information into the open. An important fact or opinion comes to light after a decision has been reached, which reopens the decision.
- *Piecemeal Perspectives.* People stick to narrow views and self-interests and fail to acknowledge that others have valid interests.
- *Free for All.* By failing to direct the flow of discussion, the principal allows negative behaviors to flourish.

Teachers should be surveyed concerning their impressions of the students' progress and the school's needs so that collaborative planning can occur. The principal and the teachers need to be involved in ongoing discussions about the school.

A community of teachers and learners must be reinforced with a strong dose of *social capital*: the necessary goodwill and trust to bond the community in a dedicated effort to improve the school's performance (Driscoll & Kerchner, 1999). When the collaboration requires creativity, informal gatherings where collaborators sit together and discuss the problem tend to be more productive than formal meetings (Mintzberg, Jorgensen, Dougherty, & Westley, 1996).

Scenario 9: Listen

The principal was skilled at speaking to groups: groups of teachers, groups of parents, groups of students. Her biggest mistake was that she never listened to these groups. She avoided meeting with parents. She organized meetings with teachers, but never let them speak. She did not put herself in a position where students could talk to her. She created a climate of animosity by only "giving" information and never "receiving" information.

Rx: Anyone who talks more than she listens may be making a big mistake. Good communication is a two-way process (see Figure 1.3). Teachers and staff members are the repositories of professional know-how about teaching and learning. Parents provide information about their children and their expectations for the school. Students bring their hopes, dreams, and interests to the school. A principal who fails to listen to these voices has a shallow understanding of the students and their needs.

A principal who does not listen to teachers, parents, and students will encounter many difficulties. Decisions will not be based on good information. Teachers will begin to work around the principal. Parents will become disgruntled and find other outlets for their comments. The principal's authority will be eroded.

Arthur Schlesinger described Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a consummate networker. "The first task of an executive, as Roosevelt saw it, was to guarantee himself an effective flow of information and ideas" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 87). A principal, too, must be a consummate networker. A principal should develop open communication so that all of the constituents have a voice in the school.

As a means of self-assessment, principals should respond to the following questions.

1. Do I share accurate information?
2. Do I provide information in a timely manner?
3. Do I share information on a regular basis?

20 20 Biggest Mistakes Principals Make and How to Avoid Them

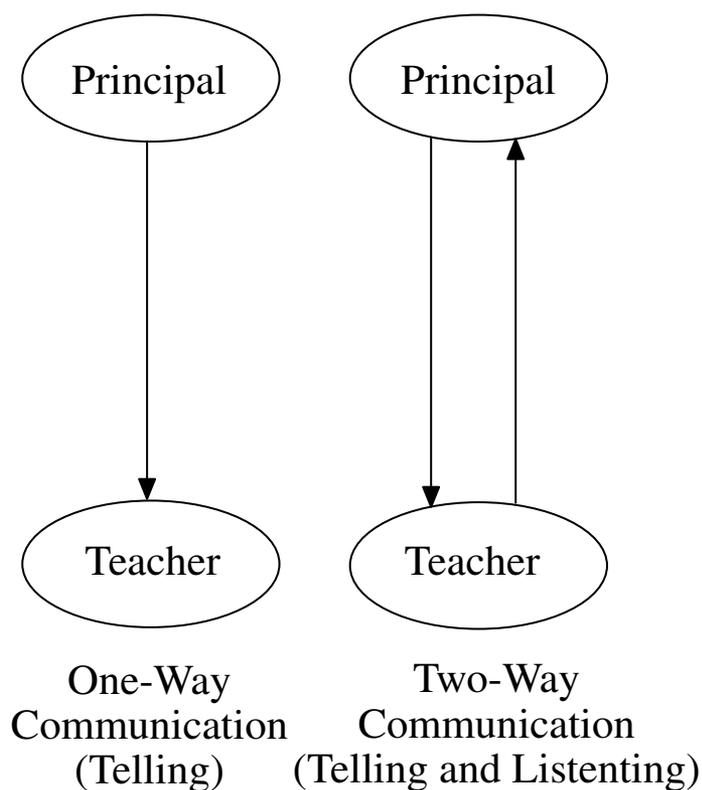


Figure 1.3 One-Way Versus Two-Way Communication

4. Am I receptive to new ideas?
5. Do I ask others for their opinion and ideas?
6. Am I accessible?
7. Have I created an effective formal communication process?
8. Do I effectively use the informal communication channels? (Weller & Weller, 2000).

In a letter to a newly appointed principal, Skelly (1996) cautioned, "Almost everyone considers themselves a good listener, and almost nobody is as good as they think" (p. 92). All should heed this caution.