

Pivotal Moments

When communicating about difficult issues, do not aim to avoid conflict but rather strive to convey the school's work and the spirit in which it is done.



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Net Assets: *As an expert in crisis communications with relationships in the independent school community, what are you seeing as major areas of concern at schools right now?*

Chris Lukach: There is a lot of trepidation around the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work schools are doing to make their cultures as equitable and just as possible. It is interesting that if you are looking at DEI purely through the lens of mission alignment and who you are as a school community, it in no way constitutes a crisis. But external forces — the political landscape, certain media — have really forced DEI into a crisis communications context.

However, this vital DEI work will only be sustainable once we stop treating it like a crisis communications issue — trying to anticipate how things are going to be seen, heard, processed and felt. With DEI, you should be asking, “What is your mission, what are your values, and where are your shortcomings?” Let’s move forward and advance along those lines.

Net Assets: *One of the challenges our schools are facing when it comes to DEI and crisis communications is families weaponizing the media. Do you have recommendations for schools to head that off?*

Lukach: As with anything that involves widespread community input, you want clear, consistent communication about your work. You should prescribe milestones and offer definitive and effective ways in which the community can involve itself in this DEI process. That can redirect or prevent ire. Often, outrage from parents on any side of an issue comes when a vacuum exists and there is no way for them to express concerns or demonstrate that they want to feel heard. Sometimes the most effective response is simply to listen.

There are also parents who turn to the media for purely emotional, not rational, reasons. This is out of a sense of loss, perhaps, or as a preemptive attack on some perceived threat. Often our schools are trying to communicate progress in a logical, thoughtful and rational way, but if parents are not processing in a rational way, it is difficult to respond to emotion with logic. We try, but it doesn’t work.

I think there is a lot of value in looking at ways you can be disarming not only in *what* you say, but in *how* you say it. Do not default to responding to a parent’s letter with a letter, or an email with an email. Disrupt the cycle of tension and agitation by picking up the phone and calling them. It’s disruptive, in a good way, and it’s much more personal. Those tactical personal touch points really go a great distance. The work of next year is going to be about how to slowly and deliberately rebuild bonds.

Always be compassionate. The way you treat people coming out of your school is watched very closely by the people still within.

From a reputational risk standpoint, it is not always about trying to find the response that will be universally lauded or loved — sometimes the right response is the least-worst option. If you are taking action and communicating in a way that honors your mission and your values, that is always defensible. Do not write to the community with the goal of avoiding conflict. Write the update consistent with the work the school is doing and in the spirit in which the school pledged to do this work.

Often, the right communication strategy is to have the difficult discussion, taking the licks early and on your own terms, rather than trying to prevent it altogether. That is certainly true in DEI discussions. Sometimes, forcing those difficult conversations is the more prudent choice than delaying them indefinitely, and hoping those parents just eventually cycle out of the school.

Net Assets: *Our schools have had to make tough decisions in the last year, and some of those changes are going to be more permanent. There are difficult conversations that are going to be forced this summer, for example in terms of personnel changes on campus. What should schools consider when communicating this sort of information?*

Lukach: When you think about personnel challenges and cutbacks as a result of schools’ financial struggles during the pandemic, you see

the contrast between emotion and logic. Leadership knows the personnel decisions are a result of financial consequences and must be made from a standpoint of sustainability and self-sufficiency. Others, though, especially those affected by the changes, will have an entirely (yet understandable) emotional response. It is on us to communicate that with complete empathy, but also to be honest and unwavering in our conviction that these changes were necessary.

Try to communicate the changes within a contained window of time, since it's important to make sure you are not creating a pattern of difficult announcements. Otherwise, you risk building a sense of distrust and financial uncertainty in the community that can erode goodwill and confidence. If an entity is perceived as facing financial difficulty, there is an impact on the perception of quality, and it is really important to limit that.

There is no point in diminishing the impact when the announcement you are making is about people who are beloved, appreciated and valued members of your community, but you can take steps to retain trust. And always be compassionate. The way you treat people coming out of your school is watched very closely by the people still within.

Net Assets: Parents are desperate for next year to be normal. But it is not going to be normal, particularly for lower school students who are not likely to be vaccinated before school begins. How should that be communicated to parents?

Lukach: Again, here is the value of listening and not just talking.

Last summer, when it was time for fall planning and decision-making, schools were not equipped with complete information from health officials or guidance from other schools or groups with which to make decisions. Schools are in a different position now. And while there is still some uncertainty, parents will be less forgiving coming into the new school year if they have not received very clear expectations.

In my experience, the desire for communication around the topic of the pandemic has been absolutely insatiable. Even if a parent knows the answer is "I don't know," it won't stop them from

asking the question. You cannot provide too much information about COVID planning and preparation, so err on the side of early, frequent, borderline over-communication.

Your communication should start with demonstrated listening. A parent focus group or survey gives them a way to start voicing any concerns, prevents those concerns from festering within the parent community in an unconstructive way, and gives you feedback to learn from and act on.

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If you have initial plans for the fall, do not wait to share them. Even if you know you have the potential of falling short on parent expectations, do not couch it as a crisis; treat it as progress. You are making progress from where you were, and you are on the path to a return to normalcy. The reopening conversation relates to the DEI conversation — as much as you want to assume that parents know where you stand on things, it's a dangerous assumption.

That should be the spirit in which you write your communications. Do not lead with an apology because you think you are not syncing with parent expectations. Lead with a statement that you are listening and innovating and working very hard to return their child to the experience they know and love and from which they benefit.

Net Assets: Our schools have responded to an astonishing number of crises in the last couple of years. With each crisis response, there is a perception in the community of mission drift. How can that perception be stopped?

Lukach: The true metric of success in a crisis is not how much noise it makes or how much media attention it generates.

Your true barometer of success in a crisis is the goodwill retained, earned and shored up by leadership, trustees, as well as the head of school and the head of school's management team.

What you are ultimately trying to do is ensure that the repository of goodwill your school leaders have built up is not lost or eroded in any way. The best crisis response is not only informed and guided by your mission, but also directly attributed to your mission. Where you risk mission drift is when you are trying to read the tea leaves so as to give the most innocuous response that's going to provoke the least reaction among everyone within your community.

Crisis communicators separate noise from impact. I know many schools with extremely high-profile cases where the school and community emerged unified and the school leadership earned — or at least retained — trust. There are plenty of examples of school-managed crises that never captured media attention but nevertheless eroded the community's trust and confidence in the school.

Remaining mission aligned may not protect against noise, but it safeguards against more consequential harm. **N**

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