THE POWER OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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The effort required to guide a school through the inspection process is considerable. Countless hours of exertion and development are scrutinised in a short period, with the inspectors digging deep into the inner workings of the school. And the post inspection period can prove even trickier to navigate, especially if the report delivered a lower than desired verdict.

In this crucial phase of a school’s redevelopment, it is essential to provide clear and concise objectives, sensitively geared towards driving change throughout the school as a whole. The natural reaction is to enter survival mode, making amendments as a means of damage limitation. Yet, it’s important to take stock of the positive feedback received, using this as a springboard to re-energise a potentially deflated staff.

However sympathetically delivered, a poor Ofsted verdict is going to hurt morale, and to ensure improvement is rooted on firm foundations, the issue of repairing damaged staff confidence should remain at the forefront of those in control of the strategic decisions. The key to this is communication at all levels.
CHAPTER 1
The Journey from ‘Requires Improvement’
1.1 Perception

A stigma can be unfairly attached to a school labelled as ‘Requiring Improvement’. The perception from the school’s immediate community can be that of a failing school, when the reality is actually a school that is a few strategic moves away from being assessed as ‘good’. **Staff, parents and pupils should be reassured of the positive connotations linked to receiving a ‘requires improvement’ judgment.** Establish early on that this verdict marks the beginning of an exciting journey for the whole school community, ultimately ending in a better learning environment for all.

1.2 Thirty Months

The guesswork of when OFSTED will reassess has been removed from the equation. Inspectors will return within 30 months and will expect to observe strategies in place to address the recommendations outlined in their report. **OFSTED won’t expect to see a resolution of all issues, but they will expect the implementation of meaningful strategies geared towards addressing their advice.**

1.3 Priorities

When actioning issues to be tackled, be sure to prioritise the order of implementation. A clear timetable of arrangements is key, succinctly detailing areas of responsibility and a timeframe in which success should be measured. Make sure deadlines are realistic and obtainable, and be clear on the importance of meeting entrusted targets.

1.4 Communication

Every member of staff, regardless of their seniority, should be aware of any proposed changes within the school. More importantly, they should be fully briefed on the reason for these changes. For alterations to have a lasting impact and a successful uptake, all involved with the school should be aware of why they are being asked to develop or change their practice. Regularly a weak point in the leadership chain is the communication between middle leaders. There must be constant dialogue between all levels of management to ensure a consistent message, especially as time passes. It’s easy for a vision to be diluted through the passing of time, so regularly revisiting expectations is crucial in successfully implementing lasting improvement.
CHAPTER 2
Effective communication at the heart of school improvement
Communication remains a unique instrument that integrates management functions in an organisation, yet due to its complex nature, it can be the single most difficult aspect of a school to efficiently manage. **A universal vision is a necessity for effectively communicating a school’s improvement.** All parties should be striving for the same goals, regardless of their authority within the structure. Governors, members of senior management, parents, trust members, and even the pupils themselves, should be clearly and efficiently communicating with one another.

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If communication is a weakness, don’t be afraid to completely overhaul the system, this period calls for radical change.

Develop an effective communication strategy, ensuring that there is no excuse for information to be lost within the system. The process of disseminating information through various channels in the school is key to achieving a consistent message between all staff. Vital to the clarity of communication throughout the school’s chain of command are crystal clear procedures and routines for discussion between the different layers of management. At each level, senior managers and middle leaders should be left with no doubt as to whom they are communicating with. These processes of communication should unite and solidify relationships. A unified team is a necessity, and providing clear procedures within a school should reduce miscommunication to a minimum, securing and enhancing relationships amongst all staff.

2.1 The Importance of a ‘Clear Communication Strategy’
To ensure a universally recognised vision for a school's improvement, the language articulated with all staff, parents, and indeed the pupils, must remain consistent. All parties should champion a universal message, positively disseminating the proposed plans required to drive the school's enhancement. Don't be afraid to use technical language with the parents and pupils, it's an important element of sharing any upcoming intentions. Be aware that a school is only as strong as its weakest link, and address this at the outset of the improvement journey.
Clear thinking is vital during this time. It is essential to reduce the core components of communication to their purest form and implement changes systematically.

Employees should remain protected and not feel threatened by necessary overhauls. Crisis management ensures that those most vulnerable during the period of transition and change are kept protected. Employees should not be simply informed, but consulted. Parents should be updated regularly and often. It is far better to overstate a point than allow rumours to circulate. Provide the whole school community with summary statements and action plans, don’t allow the temptation to protect staff to translate into concealment of the facts.
A crisis plan should be formulated and shared, being sure to take into account the impact of social media. In order to guide the public view in a favourable direction, it can be useful to utilise local press outlets. Issuing a press release is an excellent way to quickly share a message and avoid speculation and untruth. These same press releases can be released through Twitter and Facebook, again addressing any causes for concern and reducing the opportunities for conjecture. The school’s social media should be regularly updated and monitored to ensure any resulting issues are quickly highlighted and dealt with.
2.4 Solution Based Viewpoint Leads Directly to School Improvement

Traditional improvement plans focus on the cause of a problem. It can be more beneficial to shift the focus towards what is currently right, placing great emphasis on existing resources and skills.

Allow those in key positions to set their own goals, rather than dictating the direction of target setting. This allows those who will be required to work the hardest to maintain their position as the expert, rather than disempowering a large proportion of the workforce. In order to further promote solution building, carefully consider how the language shapes the outcome. Phrases such as ‘when this is fixed’ will help to promote a positive mind-set. Don’t view crisis management as a requirement necessary for survival, harness this opportunity to implement solution based changes around the school.
CHAPTER 3
Marketing can determine the outcome
During the turbulent post Ofsted period, the temptation is to focus solely on teaching and learning, resulting in the neglect of marketing matters. Although seemingly unnatural, this is a valuable time to re-energise marketing practice and procedures, partly to stunt any misconceived perception surrounding the school, but also as a means to kick-starting growth, forging a way forward with a positive outlook and mapping out a brighter future.

In such circumstances, it is hugely advantageous to be able to call on the expertise of those with specific marketing experience. Trying to juggle the complexities of running a successful marketing campaign, whilst at the same time attempting to assess its impact, is a stretch too far for most schools.

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Determine if the school actually has a marketing strategy, and clearly assess who is being targeted by any current marketing output. If a strategy isn’t in place, seek expert advice on how to begin the process of implementation.

Be clear on the intended audience and ensure promotional materials are actually reaching the chosen demographic. Different factions of the school may require similar information in slightly different forms, so decide how best to speak to the different audiences. Existing parents will be reachable through newsletters and social media channels, but consider how to break beyond this network; the wider community won’t be receiving these newsletters or checking specific social media streams so will need to be reached in different ways, for example through promotional leaflets, Facebook advertisements and local press releases.
3.2 Why are you trying to Communicate?

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It’s important to be mindful of the reasons for communicating. Is it to spread a positive message throughout the school community? Is it to settle concerns raised by issues relating to Ofsted? All contact should have a clear purpose. **Don’t dilute the significance of important messages through information overload.** And ensure output tells the school’s unique story. Work hard to share exceptional events that set the school apart from others. Any output should remain true to the school’s vision and values, consistently reiterating and reinforcing the school’s founding principles.
The channels for speaking to an audience are numerous. And it’s important to decide which works best for an individual school. Social media is great for getting information out quickly, but it can be perceived as disposable, and doesn’t lend itself to explaining more complex issues. Instead focus on a few carefully chosen channels for specific purposes. It is vital to maintain consistency in the delivery of information so that those being targeted know what to expect from the output delivered from the various sources, break beyond this network; the wider community won’t be receiving these newsletters or checking specific social media streams so will need to be reached in different ways, for example through promotional leaflets, Facebook advertisements and local press releases.

3.3 How are you going to Communicate?
It’s imperative that each element of marketing material is quantifiable, in order for its success to be monitored.

Take time to regularly review the impact of a campaign. Decide which aspects gain the most traction and focus on expanding these areas, whilst at the same time, phase out the less successful segments of the strategy. It’s not acceptable to send marketing material out into the ether without the means to accurately assess its impact.
CHAPTER 4
Building Solid Internal Communication Develops a Stronger School Team
4.1 School Identity

Any major strategic shift in a school should begin by reaffirming the desired identity. Taking the time to understand what is unique about an individual school is the first step towards making positive distinctions from other educators. Establish a core identity, be clear on the perception of the local community, and consider how the school is viewed by the wider public. Canvas opinion and ensure that the desired identity is being successfully projected, and more importantly, correctly interpreted by those outside the school gates.
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Failure to communicate the school’s aims, values and achievements to the staff and students, make school management a mirage. It may be that the identity is not clear, and that those in charge of guiding the school are unsure of their strategic direction because of this foggy identity. Here, the guidance of external expertise is invaluable in extracting core values and providing an impartial view on the correct projection for the school. It often takes a fresh pair of professional eyes to clearly map out the correct vision for a school’s ethos and identity. Any expertise that is brought onboard will be able to offer support throughout the process, providing regular follow up meetings to review the effectiveness of brand implementation.
Deeply embedding school values at every level ensures that all stakeholders have an intrinsic sense of purpose and vision. Consider how well the school is branded. **Strong branding creates a unique and powerful identity, a feeling of pride amongst staff, parents and pupils, and a sense of belonging to all who come in contact with the school.**

4.2 Building the School Values, Aims and Branding
4.3
Robust Internal Communication

Unbreakable internal communications are an essential requirement of a high functioning school. Simple and accessible systems channelled through clear lines of responsibility allow the free flow of information. Management should spend time supporting and developing the infrastructure by enhancing the capacity for effective communications. If made a priority, effective communication sits prominently throughout the school, and dictates the ethos of all involved; it shouldn’t be an issue that only receives intervention when deemed to be failing. A seemingly effective system can be rendered useless by communication roadblocks, such as poor Wi-Fi access or limited access to technology. Consider what these potential roadblocks might be and make provision to overcome the difficulties. Overcoming the problem may be as simple as purchasing a communal iPad with the specific intention of allowing all staff access to their emails.
It is important to recognise the routes through which information passes, as it travels around a school. Teachers are generally unable to find large periods of time throughout the day in which to respond to lengthy emails, meaning that efficient procedures for communication are essential. A crucial part of the communication process in school is the ability to share via word of mouth, stealing brief moments of time from a lesson to pass on a message. But in these instances, the lack of a paper trail can result in information being easily forgotten. When verbal communication is used, it is imperative to follow up the message with a brief email, reiterating the point and providing evidence of the communication. Strong record keeping of all informal communications is key, as it allows reproduction and revisiting of a message, if necessary.
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Where time is limited, bulletin type alerts can prove useful, keeping all up to date with daily proceedings. Be sure to make full use of the calendar facility built into email programs, as when used correctly, can be an excellent way of checking availability. Notice boards in prominent places can be beneficial, but be sure to avoid them becoming stagnant. And don’t be afraid to hold regular staff briefings. Some schools choose to begin every day with a very short meeting, aimed at addressing the day ahead. It can be an invaluable opportunity to deliver a consistent message to all members of the school body. It also brings the staff together, reducing the opportunity for isolation, and helps to maintain a positively buoyant atmosphere.
Having a clear picture of the school as an entirety, develops a robust team. Be sure to place the best leaders at the heart of the school system, and provide the support to thrive. Staff will inevitably join and leave the team, so aim to recruit and develop great teachers as the opportunities arise. Always set the highest expectations, and encourage every member of the school to lead by example, regardless of their position or rank. To ensure the best candidates are applying for vacancies, work hard to entice the highest quality staff. Job adverts should be well written, selling the strengths of the school and clearly outlining the benefits of working in an ambitious and productive environment.
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CONCLUSION
Effective communication is the lifeblood of any successful organisation. It allows challenges to be easily identified, problems to be quickly addressed and solutions successfully implemented. A school with collaboration embedded at its heart will see conflict kept to a minimum. Parents will feel adequately informed, and be confident in the school’s ability to implement change. Staff will be clear in their role, and feel trusted to perform each task to the highest standard. And the children will feel valued, respected; confident in the knowledge that their individual voice is not only heard, but a crucial element of what drives their learning forward.

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Summary:
1. Review current systems
2. Know and understand your audience
3. Define clear vision and values
4. Create a marketing strategy
5. Understand your brand identity
6. Seek external marketing expertise
7. Strengthen internal and external communications
8. Focus on the language of improvement
9. Build a narrative around your school’s story
10. Develop a strong staff team