



“This is a ‘mission-driven’ moment.” Advice for Heads of School from Communications Directors

“At its simplest: listen first, communicate second, and then go back to listening and engaging the community in meaningful, honest dialogue and keep it going. Understand there is not a short-term fix, but rather as a school head you are a leader guiding your community through a moment which will be challenging and difficult. But, if you are willing to be uncomfortable, the community, and especially the students, will grow tremendously.”

The events of this spring offered a set of unique challenges for all Independent Schools. As schools were addressing the challenge of bringing closure to the last few weeks of school during the COVID-19 crisis, they were also faced with responding and tending to their communities in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. As the burgeoning movement for racial justice swept across America and the world, many Independent School communities heard the voices and narratives of people of color in a new and urgent context. The role of Independent Schools in supporting and upholding systemic racism and structural inequity has never been more deeply or openly questioned. Via means, such as community Zoom meetings and social media platforms, students, families, and alumni of color, as well as white allies and accomplices, shared experiences of racial injustice that demand attention, care, and change.

From a communications standpoint, the month of June, 2020 presented a test like no other for leadership at Independent Schools. During times of crisis, school communities often rely on the connection and relationships created by in-person meetings, forums, and assemblies to offer responsive care for their constituencies. Because of the limits imposed by COVID-19, school leaders were challenged to find ways to appropriately demonstrate responsive care from a challenging distance.

Given this context, many school Communications Directors also found themselves in uncharted territory. The challenges of the past few months revealed that the role of Communication Director is not only logistical and

operational, but critically strategic. With this in mind, Pollyanna posed a single question to over 100 Directors of Communication across Independent Schools:

As a Communications Director, what advice would you give to your Head about communicating with your school’s community during this time of change and unrest?

The advice given was far-ranging, but, when viewed in aggregate, argued that Heads should focus on finding balance between three separate, but interwoven tensions in their communications:

- **Tension #1: Balancing Individual Authenticity with Reflecting All Voices**
- **Tension #2: Balancing Timely Responses with Avoiding Overly-Impulsive Responses**
- **Tension #3: Balancing a Bias Towards Action with Making Attainable Promises**

While there is no “one size fits all” formula for balancing these tensions, Communications Directors offer strategies for how Heads might manage them in relation to the individual contexts and cultures of their schools. As many respondents shared, the ultimate hope is for **a communications strategy that authentically reflects the needs of the school community.**

“...be thoughtful, thorough, and open.”

Tension #1: Balancing Individual Authenticity with Reflecting All Voices

One of the most important (and most common) challenges for Heads is to meaningfully convey personal convictions while also reflecting back what they have learned from their community in any given crisis. Lacking balance between these concepts might leave a community feeling unheard or that the Head is not personally invested in finding solutions. Communications Directors offered the advice below for finding this balance, especially as it regarded authentically connecting with constituents managing pain and harm in this moment:

- **“Be transparent, consistent, and bravely take the school into this needed seachange.”**
- **“Be humble, transparent, and invite conversation. Share the constructive actions taken for change, even if desired results are still in progress. Don’t expect to have all the answers. Don’t pander to the imagined response of white parents/donors. This is a ‘mission-driven’ moment.”**
- **“Offer authentic empathy and apologies to those who have been directly affected. Don’t be defensive or in any way silence the voices of those speaking out. Be proactive.”**
- **“Approach all criticism and demand for change with an attitude of gratitude – these constituents care so much for your community and your BIPOC students that they want to hold you accountable and see you do better by them.”**

Many respondents also advised Heads to “have more eyes” on the messages they share with their communities, particularly the perspectives of DEI Directors and practitioners. The advice below captured the essence of this advice in a set of helpful questions for Heads and Communications Directors to ask themselves as they move forward.

- **“Get feedback from a number of relevant stakeholders about any communication. Don’t rush; be thoughtful, thorough, and open.**
- *Do you value communications enough to give the role a seat at the leadership table and a reporting structure commensurate with its responsibility in shaping the image of your school?*
- *Do you have the diversity necessary in that area to accurately communicate to not just the families of yesteryear but the ones will be entering your kindergartens a few years from now?*
- *Can you approach the stories you hear from alums and parents as though every one of them are true, because they likely are?*
- *What do you want to do differently next time (because there will be a next time)?”*

“Often, the easiest thing to do is to do the wrong thing...”

Tension #2: Balancing Timely Responses with Avoiding Overly-Impulsive Responses

At the heart of every cliché is a basic truth. Never is this more evident than the idea that “timing is everything.” During a crisis, many Heads and Communications Directors often consider the content of their messages to be as important as the timing of when they are shared with the community. In a crisis that affects all constituencies in a school community the window for a “just right moment” can seem inordinately small. Thus, Communications Directors in this survey offered strategies for tending to this balance:

- “While important to act quickly, there were moments where we risked issuing knee-jerk communications. It’s important to slow down, be thoughtful and ensure that everyone is being communicated to. On the flip side, we also can’t be too slow. There have been too many cooks with different ideas/strategies. A pre-designated core team of only a few needs to come together to ultimately make the strategic decisions. Running communications by 10 people (even 5 people!) slows us down considerably. We were too late because of this in some cases. Finally, internal communications are sometimes put last, whether it’s because we think most are “in the know” or that other groups take priority. This is often a big misstep.”

- “It’s vital not to let media inquiries dictate the timing of our communications; we need to let that be motivated by community need and expectations. “
- ““Don’t just do something - stand there!” I received this advice at a leadership conference several years ago. Essentially rather than reacting to each thing as it comes, be strategic. Often, the easiest thing to do is to do the wrong thing, in the name of doing something. DOC positions in schools have typically been tactical - make sure there are no typos in parent communication, put out a newsletter and magazine, maintain a website and social media feed, perhaps handle the rare school crisis. Don’t allow that tactical posture to win the day in this situation. There is no quick fix.”

While it is never possible to satisfy all constituencies with the timing and frequency of communications, it is possible to be consistently thoughtful and balanced when considering the right moment to connect with the community. Communications Directors stressed the importance of taking strategic pauses to consider the effects of timing and the larger context of a crisis before “hitting send.” As long as the Head is authentically transparent about why they have chosen to connect during an emotionally-charged crisis, they will maintain the trust in an area that can never be managed perfectly.

“...focus on today and the future.”

Tension #3: Balancing a Bias Towards Action with Making Attainable Promises

The combined circumstances of the COVID-19 Crisis and the racial justice movement, and what they have revealed about inequity and injustice, have amplified voices calling for change in many of the policies, practices, and cultures of Independent Schools. These changes often need to emanate “from the top” via direct action and leadership from the Head of School. There is much pressure on Heads to calibrate how to affect meaningful change while also staying within the bounds of what feels attainable for the institution. From a communications perspective, it is crucial to signal a balance between these ideas. A Head risks alienating important constituencies by either failing to act, or by reaching too far

without consulting important voices. In the survey, Communications Directors offered some frameworks for how to think about this tension:

- “Focus on action and how we are currently working to address injustices. While it’s important to connect the movement for justice to our mission, we cannot rest on our historic work; focus on today and the future.”
- “Be forthright, open and honest but prioritize listening - also don’t over-promise on what you might not be able to deliver.”

- **“Heads of school should take the time to think carefully about their community and its unique context:**
 - *Who are your community members? What are their backgrounds and experiences?*
 - *How far along is your community in the dialogue on questions of diversity, equity and inclusion?*
 - *Who is truly engaged and interested? What is working well? Where is there room for growth?*
 - *What is needed at this moment to advance the dialogue in a meaningful and productive way?*
- *What are short-term, mid-term and long-term objectives, and how can this moment, where there is so much groundswell of support, help move the community forward in a meaningful way?”*

Finally, one Communications Director offered advice that young writers in schools have been hearing from their teachers for decades. The wisdom we offer to students is often also the best advice for adults:

- **“Lastly show, don’t tell. Leaders are judged by the actions they take and well they should be.”**

“Remember that it’s not about you.” Authentically Reflecting the Needs of the School Community.

In challenging times, all leaders wish to find pathways to heal, nurture, and forward their communities positively. The survey responses indicate that the communications most likely to help accomplish this are directly connected to, and reflective of, all voices in the community. This is especially true as it relates to a school’s community of color or any other traditionally marginalized group within the realm of Independent Schools. When Heads are grounded in the diverse voices and needs of a community, they enhance their own ability to share messages across divergent opinions and create momentum for positive and necessary change.

- **“Be true to your school in all communications. Make sure that what you say mirrors the experience of the students, especially, but also faculty, staff and parents. It is okay to be ambitious with school values and aim for something higher and better, but it must be done with a clear and honest look at what the experience is like for all community members.”**
- **“Remember that it’s not about you. The Head of School must prioritize the people in the community who are the most affected by the crisis, in this case Black students, faculty, staff and also parents. Make sure their voices are being heard and elevated, seek to learn about their experience, reach out to them, and continue to do so.”**



POLLYANNA
Every Voice Matters.