
1

Who Are the Stakeholders and Publics in Your School?

Years ago, when principals only had to concern themselves with passing down messages from their schools to their stakeholders, the communication management function depended to a large extent on the maintenance of good mailing lists. Savvy principals would make sure that their schools had up-to-date lists of all their key stakeholders, complete with phone numbers and mailing addresses.

Nobody could ever be sure that the materials sent out were read. No matter. The principals always had their lists. If necessary, they could prove the mailings had gone out. That is what was important. Many of the mailings were dictated by district or state mandates. Many were designed to solicit a response. “You can bring a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink,” used to be a common explanation for a light response to a district mailing.

What the principal missed, of course, was the fact that most of the stakeholders who received these mailings simply did not recognize the issue being discussed as significant enough to warrant their attention. Or if they did, the information provided did not explain how

they could get involved to address the issue. Or, as likely, most of the people who received the mailing probably did not feel much involved with the school anyway, so they simply read the message, pitched the brochure, and proceeded to forget what they read in short order.

Connecting with a school's stakeholders is not any easier today than it ever was. In fact, it probably is tougher than ever—but it can be done, especially if principals employ the strategies covered in this book.

It Takes Two to Communicate

School principals are well aware of the fact that they need to communicate with various "stakeholders." They know they constitute a vast network of individuals who have an investment of one kind or another in the schools. For many of these stakeholders, their links to the schools are formal. For example, many are school employees. Teachers, support staff, and fellow administrators are all stakeholders. But so are students. Parents are stakeholders, too. The superintendent and members of the school board are stakeholders as well.

Stakeholders also can have less formal links to the school. So add members of the community to the list of stakeholders, as well as representatives of the local media, neighbors who live down the street from the school, and the individuals who sell meat and potatoes to the cafeteria. The number of stakeholders can be staggering. In a small community, with a single K-12 school, everyone is a stakeholder. In a large suburb, the stakeholders for a single school may be greater in number, even if they are more geographically bound.

Although communicating with stakeholders is an important part of a principal's job, many do it rather ineffectively. That is because communication takes both parties to make the process work. For many of the school's stakeholders, communicating with the principal requires more interest than they have, more involvement than they are willing to make, and more time to retain information than they have.

Other stakeholders may feel only marginally connected to the school and consequently tend to ignore or forget nearly everything they hear about it. Still others brush off the principal's efforts to communicate because they do not believe their involvement with the school would make any difference anyway.

Public schools are among the many public institutions that the public no longer feels they have to take any responsibility for. Decades of school administrators communicated to them the message that the public schools were in capable hands and did not need the public's

involvement, just their support. Public Agenda discovered that two thirds of their respondents said they were comfortable leaving school policies for educators to decide (Farkas, Foley, & Duffett, 2001, p. 15). It is quite possible that the public no longer believes that the public schools are their schools. As federal and state governments have become increasingly involved in setting policies for neighborhood schools, local taxpayers could easily feel the need for their involvement has all but disappeared.

In this era of technology, some will argue for e-mail messages and Web site postings to get community engagement. Others will say nothing beats personal phone calls or face-to-face meetings. Still other principals will argue that they have tried them all, and one approach will work one time and fail miserably another time. Principals are frequently urged to get good news stories published in the local paper. That seems to make sense. When asked whether a good news story about the school offset a bad news story about the school, however, they are not sure. What is a principal to do?

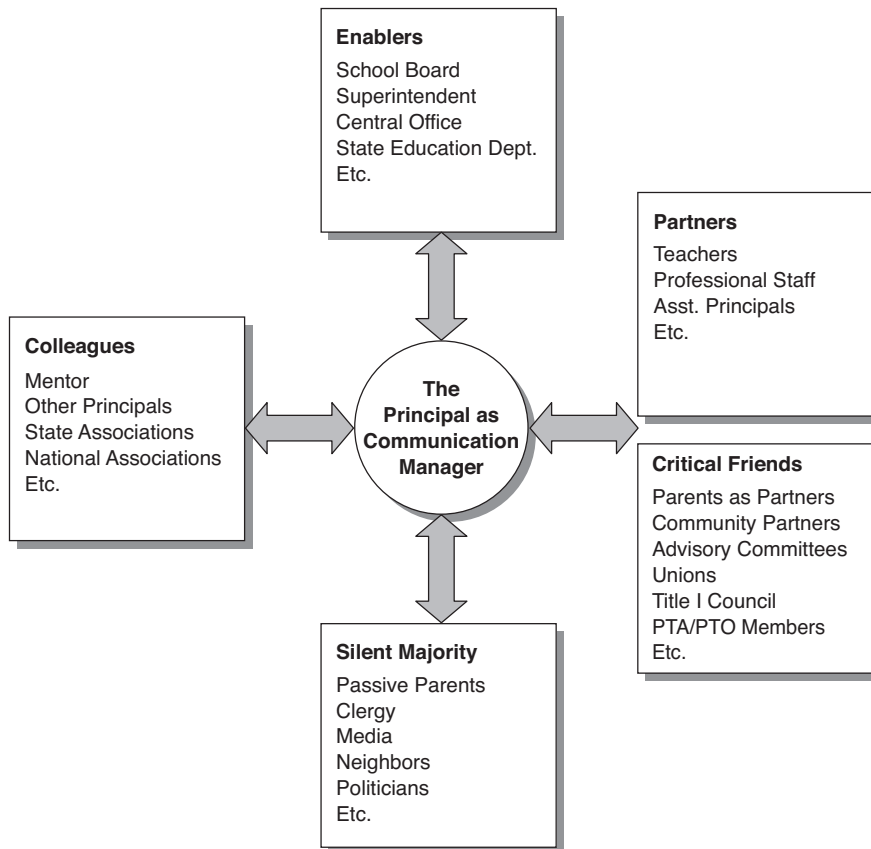
Of course, if all principals had to worry about was how to convince stakeholders to process their communication, this book would be much thinner than it is. Many stakeholders are concerned about what is going on at the local school and do not rely on the principal as their primary source of information about it. These stakeholders will get their news elsewhere, sit around with their peers digesting its meaning, and then will want a showdown session with the principal to get to the bottom of things. Sometimes, the problem they want to talk about has not even surfaced on the principal's radar screen yet.

Stakeholders Are People With Links to the Schools

Stakeholders are people linked to an organization. They are linked because they and the organization have consequences on each other—they cause problems for each other. People linked to an organization have a stake in it, which Carroll (1989) defined as “an interest or a share in an undertaking” (p. 56). A stakeholder, therefore, is “any individual or group who can affect or is affected by the actions, decisions, policies, practices, or goals of the organization” (Freeman, 1984, p. 25).

For example, the school board, superintendent, central office, and other officials who have power over the school constitute a group of stakeholders. All the school's employees can constitute a stakeholder group. Still another group may be dominated by parents but includes

Figure 1.1 The principal manages the communication between the principal's office and the school's various stakeholders.



PTA/PTO members, school volunteers, and reading tutors. Together, these are principals' major stakeholders with whom they will have their most frequent communication interactions. The largest category, though, includes politicians, members of the media, residents of the neighborhood, and others who only tangentially touch the school. A final category consists of the principal's mentors, friends, fellow principals, and colleagues from state and national associations.

The stakeholder groups are fluid in that they contract and expand all the time. Nevertheless, each of these major groups has a name, as Figure 1.1 illustrates.

The first step in any effort to be strategic about communication management is to establish a "stakeholders' map" for a school. The map is a starting point for organizing the school's individual stakeholders into various categories so that principals can rank or assign

them to groups to indicate their impact on their schools or the extent to which their schools believe they should pay attention to them. In the case of public schools, this grouping generally produces five broad categories of stakeholders.

Enablers

Enablers are those individuals who can fire principals or make their lives so miserable that they are likely to quit if pressured. The list of Enablers varies from city to city as the nation struggles to figure out who is in charge of the public schools. In some large cities, the mayors and state governors play a central role along with state commissioners of education and state boards of education in the operation of the public schools. For example, in Rhode Island in February 2005, the state commissioner of education personally ordered a Providence high school to reevaluate all its teachers and administrators to decide who should be transferred from the building (Archer, 2005). Although such hands-on intervention from the state level is unusual, principals should not be surprised to find they confront an ever-expanding list of Enablers.

In a small town, school principals' Enablers may be prominent ministers, the owner of a company that employs many of the town's people, or perhaps the president of the local college or even newspaper editors. Even in cities the size of New York or Los Angeles, however, it is not uncommon for the mayors to get involved in school-related issues and dictate to the board of education how it should conduct its business right down to dictating how individual schools should operate. Enablers, in other words, are the powerbrokers who issue orders to principals or, in many cases, they are the people who influence the officials who officially issue the orders to the building-level administrators.

Principals do not need to read a handbook to know it is important to pay attention to the communication that comes out of the central office. But it is also important for principals to understand that they need to pay some attention to the communication flow back to the central office.

Principals will want to pay attention to what comes down from the central office. As an employee of the district, the principal works for an Enabler, the superintendent of schools, or one of the superintendent's top administrators. So there is a chain of command in addition to a communication loop operating between the school and the central office that is key. Many of the issues and problems that impact the school originate as policy directives and mandates that originate in the central office or come through the central office from state or

federal governments. Principals need to understand these policies and mandates. They need to understand the reasoning behind them, the laws that buttress them, and the recourse, if any, for those who may wish to reject or oppose them. Only then can the principal be in a position to communicate effectively about them with the school's other stakeholders.

Partners

Having said Enablers were the key stakeholder group, an equally strong argument could be made on behalf of Partners. These are the teachers, professional staff, assistant principals, and other personnel from within the school. But Partners also include family members, including parents, grandparents, and others involved in the lives of the children who attend the school. This group includes those community members involved in civic, counseling, cultural, health, recreation, and other agencies and organizations and businesses that strengthen the school's programs or family practices and foster student learning and development.

The term *Partners* is used intentionally to convey a particular kind of relationship among school, families, and communities. Epstein et al. (2002) noted,

Partners can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parent skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create a partnership is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life. (p. 7)

A quality school is characterized by a principal and a staff that distribute leadership, trust one another, and openly communicate about issues and problems. Individuals who have this relationship with principals constitute their core "Partners."

Because they are in the building together, engaged in the same rituals, practices, and routines, Partners and principals should not have many secrets from one another. But that does not mean formal communication is unnecessary. Most schools have a vicious grapevine that spreads "news" rapidly through the faculty and custodial staff, so formal communication may not seem necessary to get information around the building. Principals who rely on the grapevine as their communication channel are not being particularly strategic, however, especially when dealing with Partners who tend to cluster on both

ends of the agree-disagree continuum. Simply put, strategic principals want to put as much of their communication in writing as possible to formalize it, particularly concerning sensitive or emotional issues. This ensures accuracy. That way, principals and their supporters can be assured they are working off the same page when the message gets repeated to others. Those who may disagree with the principals will at least have to argue facts, not hearsay.

The rumor mill or grapevine will always spew information, and the Partners will avail themselves to it if the principal communicates with them or not. But unless the principal officially explains what or why something is affecting the school's stakeholders, and particularly its Partners, then someone else is likely to cook up an "official" explanation. It is seldom in the principal's best interest to let someone else do the explaining for him or her.

Box 1.1 Cultivating Your Grapevine

Most researchers agree that the rumor mill is as old as time—and that it was dubbed the grapevine in popular speech after wires were strung cross-country in the mid-1800s to power the new-fangled telegraph. Telegrams have long since been abandoned as a primary method of rapid communication, but the organizational grapevine is as alive as ever.

It is a good bet that you will never eliminate the active grapevine in your schools and communities. Whether your grapevine yields sour grapes or fine wine depends on how well you care for and feed it. Consider what the research tells us.

Many employees have been conditioned to believe that if something is really important, they will probably hear about it on the grapevine first. The grapevine is a real and important communication tool for most organizations. Also, grapevines are viable at all levels of an organization—from top to bottom. But they may not all intersect with one another.

Result: Know how information informally flows throughout your organization and your communities, and have ways to get information to these networks when needed.

Rumors

Some people are more prone than others to spread rumors on a grapevine. But how listeners respond to the information depends a great deal on the organization's history. If the organization,

particularly frontline communicators (e.g., principals or administrative assistants), is known for being accessible and forthright, people will be more likely to check out information with such authoritative sources before believing it and spreading the gossip.

Result: Train your staff in the importance of listening to the grapevine and addressing key issues as they emerge. They need to appreciate that even their inaction in addressing a rumor may be interpreted by some as evidence that it “must be true.”

Credibility

The credibility of the source of any message has a great deal to do with whether or not it is accepted and believed—in both formal communication tactics and informal ones, such as a grapevine. In some cases, superintendents and board members may not enjoy as much credibility with some audiences as building principals or community members. In such cases, certain messages may be better delivered by these people alone or in joint presentations with a superintendent or board members.

Lesson: It is important to strategize who will deliver certain messages, not just what the message will be (National School Public Relations Association, 2004).

Going silent with Partners is always a mistake on the part of a principal. If the principal has not been communicating with them, the Partners will go to external sources to get information and to express their views. Sources of information, and outlets for their views, include their unions, the central office, the media, interest groups, and parents. In other words, before they know it, the principals are out of the communication loop with the very folks everyone would expect to be their closest allies. When that happens, the principal’s effectiveness as a leader will be sorely questioned.

The lesson here is to never take Partners for granted. Although principals pass them in the hall daily, meet with them regularly, and read the same memos from the central office that they do, principals should never assume they “got the message.” Likewise, principals should never assume Partners can be kept out of the information loop. They expect to hear from the school’s leader on matters affecting the school and to hear about it early, often, and thoroughly. Also, Partners want the school’s leader to listen to them in turn. Principals spend a large percentage of their communication management time

engaged in dialogue with their Partners. The time is always well spent. Partners are frequently conduits for other stakeholders; consequently, the better informed the Partners, the better the information flow to the broader audience.

Silent Majority

The overworked label, "silent majority," is applied to the largest category of stakeholders for the simple reason that it sticks so well. This group, the majority of the school's stakeholders, is for the most part silent when it comes to communication. That is, this group is not likely to ever go seeking information or to process information it receives about the school. If the principal attempts to communicate with members of the group, the effort will for the most part be a waste of time and resources.

Does this mean the principal can simply ignore this group of stakeholders? No, it is not that simple. Some of the majority should not be silent. They just do not realize it. It is the principal's job to convince them to start communicating about what is going on at the school.

At the top of that list is passive parents and other family members of the students in the schools. Unfortunately, not every parent is a member of the school's partnership, although they should be. Principals would like them to be. If principals could wish it to happen, they would be. Part of every principal's communication plan should be a strategy to woo the parents from the Silent Majority camp into a partnership group. How that might be done is discussed in a later chapter. Simply stated, the more involved a person becomes in school activities, the less likely that person is to feel constrained about being able to make a difference and the more likely that person is to seek information about the school.

Everyone who has even a tangential link to the school is a member of the silent majority. Imagine a district with a retired couple living across the street from a school. The couple has never visited the school, never enrolled a child in it, or never given it much thought. The couple is one of the school's Silent Majority. Obviously, that school's principal should not spend much of her limited printing and mailing budget stuffing brochures and pamphlets into the couple's mailbox. It would serve no purpose. A principal should never completely turn a deaf ear to the Silent Majority, however, because its members could quickly become a hostile "vocal minority."

Returning to our district in which the school board has decided to increase the enrollment in one of its schools next year and to place portable classrooms in its playground, a prediction is possible. The

retired couple living close to the school might be expected to be angry when they hear the news. They are likely to claim that their property value will fall; that more school buses on the street will interfere with and create a safety hazard for their own driving; that the extra students attending the new modules will increase the noise level in the neighborhood, which will in turn disturb their pets; and, of course, that they were not consulted. This “one-issue” public will exist until the problem goes away or their concern is addressed. Then they will return to the ranks of the Silent Majority. In the meantime, however, they will be actively engaged in a public hostile to the school’s interests and doing their best to get the principal to focus his time and energy on their single issue.

Others within the Silent Majority are individuals the school would like to have as allies if not partners, such as the media. Every principal wants the education reporters as friends of their school. If the local media can afford to put reporters full-time on the education beat, however, it is probably because the community has many schools. That means there are many principals seeking to be the reporters’ friends. It can be done, though, and some tips will be offered later.

The point is that the Silent Majority contains a large number of people. Some logically belong in the principal’s partnership category. Part of what a principal’s communication strategy is all about is identifying people by name within the Silent Majority and then working the communication model to move them gently over to the Partnership category. Keep in mind that the move requires them to boost their awareness of the school first. Then, ever so gently, the principal should help increase their level of involvement with the school. Once that occurs—presto—the principal has more names to add to the partnership stakeholder lists.

Colleagues

All school principals have Friends. They are members of their Stakeholder group. They tend to give honest feedback, have no axe to grind, and have the principals’ best interests at heart. For that reason alone, they are a pleasure to communicate with. In addition, they generally know what the principals are going through, so they have empathy, can offer advice, and provide solace. Principals need to surround themselves with trusted Friends. A mentor is important. Fortunately, most principals come into the job with one. In many cases, it is a veteran school administrator or a university professor.

If principals do not have one, they should get one. It is probably easier than they think. If they are new principals, then they should

ask their supervisors or superintendents to be paired with principals in their districts. The word “mentor” never has to be used. The new principals should simply say they would like their supervisors’ opinion of who they could best learn the ropes from by observing their schools, attending their staff meetings on occasion, or picking up the phone and asking a question from time to time.

If the district is small and a principal needs a mentor, she might ask the executive director of her state’s principal association to match her up with one or two top principals in her county or area of the state. New principals do not need to be shy; the top principals were all first-year principals at one time too.

Other principals are also a key part of a principal’s network. In communities served by more than one school, members of one school’s stakeholder group overlap with those of another’s stakeholder group. They may all share the same media, for example, and obviously the same school board, superintendent, and central office. So it behooves principals to stay in the loop with their administrator colleagues. Also, secondary school principals always want to know what the principals of the middle or junior high schools, or even the principals of elementary schools, that make up their feeder schools are picking up from their stakeholder groups that may impact their schools. The reverse is also true. A cunning principal communicates carefully but continually with his circle of compadres.

Identifying “Publics” Among Stakeholders

Principals communicate regularly with their stakeholders about all kinds of school-related information, and it does not strike anyone as anything out of the ordinary. School lunch menus are posted on the Web site, upcoming school events are announced, teacher appointments are made, and school closing dates are scheduled. Most of this communication comes from the principal’s office to the stakeholders in the customary top-down manner for which bureaucratic organizations are famous and yet few, if any, of the stakeholders would want it any other way. The principal is expected to generate such communication.

The principal does not need to be too concerned with the management of the day-to-day routine flow of communication from the principal’s office to the stakeholders. That is something every principal and a good administrative assistant can work out between themselves within the first year on the job.

What principals need to be concerned about is the management of information when there is a problem or issue. Because when there is a

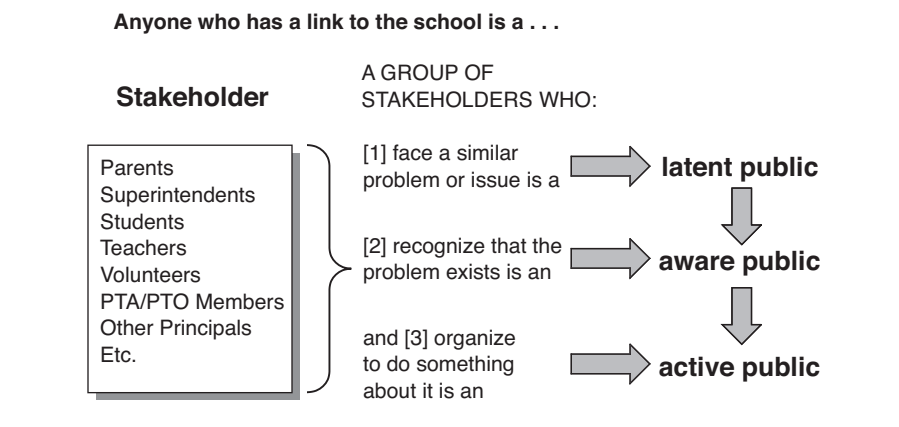
problem or issue—the words can probably be used interchangeably, but in educational circles they sometimes take on different meanings—the communication challenge increases.

The reason the challenge increases is because the presence of a problem or issue creates a public. In 1938, John Dewey defined a public as “a group of people who (a) face a similar problem; (b) recognize that the problem exists; and (3) organize to do something about the problem” (as quoted in Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 145; Figure 1.2). Since Dewey defined a public, Grunig and Hunt have posited that there are really four kinds of publics:

1. **Aware publics:** Stakeholders who face a similar situation or problem and recognize it as such.
2. **Active publics:** Stakeholders who face an issue or problem, recognize it, and organize to take some action.
3. **Latent publics:** Stakeholders who are confronted with an issue or problem but do not recognize its existence.
4. **Nonpublics:** Stakeholders who are faced with an issue or problem but remain unaware of or unconcerned about its existence.

To illustrate how publics within stakeholder groups form around an issue, think of a state department of education that will soon release test scores for a school. The scores will show that the students, on average, did well. This will come as no surprise to its stakeholders because the school has a reputation for excellence. The

Figure 1.2 The school’s stakeholders make up three different kinds of publics with three different kinds of communication behavior.



data also show, however, that the special education students scored below the state average for special education students on the exams and did not meet minimum state requirements. Consequently, the school is going to be put on “probation.” It is definitely a black eye for the principal and his faculty, and when the news is released it will cause uproar among several of his Partners and generate media inquiries about the quality of his instructional program. When the press covers the story, the neighbors living near the school certainly will hear about it.

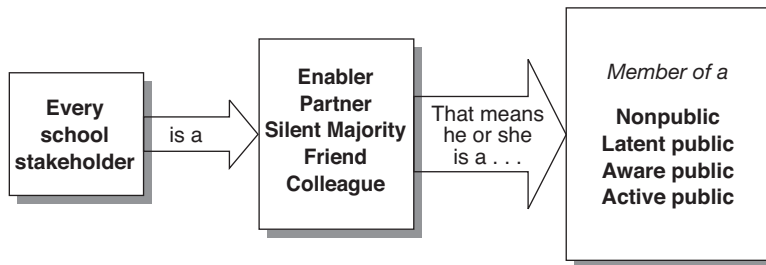
For this illustration, four publics composed of stakeholders are involved: the school faculty, the parents of the special education students in the school, the local media, and the neighbors living near the school. These publics include those that can be described as aware, latent, and nonpublic. Potentially, each may become an active public, and some parents of special education student are invariably active.

The first two audiences, school faculty and special education parents, are aware publics because they knew the students had been tested. They realize that the state department will release the findings, and they are awaiting information about the results and poised to become active publics. As such, they are receptive to an official explanation about the test scores. Had the principal not provided an explanation that made sense to these two publics, however, as active publics, they would have sought out other information sources, conversed among themselves, and undoubtedly found someone or something to blame for the poor scores.

Before the release of information, the media were a latent public—that is, a “dormant” or a “docile” public. They recognized that the state had tested the students but were relying on a news release to be reminded when the results were available. With the story in hand, the media would move from latent to aware to active quickly. As an active public, the media were likely to treat the principal’s explanation of the test scores as just one of several they quoted, including some that may flat out disagree with the official version.

The neighbors were a nonpublic from the beginning. They were completely unaware of the testing of the children. They would probably remain a nonpublic, even after the media coverage of the test scores. Most would not bother to pay attention to the news reports. Those that did, unless they had a child in the school or a connection to the issue, would probably quickly forget about the matter because (a) it did not involve them, (b) they did not recognize the testing results as a serious issue, and (c) they did not think there was anything they could do about student test scores anyway.

Figure 1.3 Different issues and problems will sort stakeholders into different publics.



To be effective communication managers, principals have to realize that on any given school issue or problem, some stakeholders are latent publics, others are aware publics, and still others are active publics, and each requires him or her to use different communication techniques. In addition, nonpublics can quickly transform into aware or active publics.

Although different publics are going to form in response to different issues or problems, there are some generalizations about which kinds of publics are likely to form in each stakeholder group. For example, Enablers are at least aware publics and probably active when it comes to most issues. Partners are like Enablers in that most of them are at least aware publics, and many of them are active publics when it comes to most, if not all, of the school's issues and problems.

The only two stakeholder groups with latent publics or nonpublic in their ranks are the Silent Majority and Friends. What this means is that when principals initiate communication, they can probably put stakeholders in both of these large categories at the bottom of their priority lists. That is not to say there are not important people within these categories who should hear from the principals. There are. But everyone in the other categories is a "must contact" individual. If they do not hear from the principal, they will seek information from someone else, and the principal will struggle to catch up as a credible source of information about the issue. Meanwhile, if everyone in the last two stakeholder categories receives the information a day or two later, most will not even notice, and far fewer will care.

Finally, although these generalizations provide principals with some seat-of-the pants guidance, the day-to-day issues will provide all kinds of complicating exceptions. For example, some teachers at a

school in a small community have decided to do something about what they perceive as poor-quality professional development sessions. Fed up with 1-day events they say provide limited information on topics with little relevance to their classrooms, they have petitioned the principal and the superintendent for control over the content and delivery of future sessions. This group of teachers is an active public. But other teachers who participate in the same training sessions do not see any problems with them. They are a latent public because they face the same situation, but they do not recognize it as problematic. A third group of teachers are an aware public. Although they also think the sessions are of poor quality, they are not motivated to take any action because some are near retirement and others are planning to transfer schools.

Although all the teachers are members of the Partners stakeholder group, and Partners are generally active publics, on this issue they formed three different publics—active, latent, and aware. Thus, although principals will generalize about the communication behavior of entire stakeholder groups, they need to be cautious about relying on membership in a stakeholder group as a sole predictor of the likely communication behavior of its members. There will always be exceptions, unique cases, and variations.

Summary

This chapter discussed the need for two-way communication between principals and stakeholders. It also introduced readers to the notions of educational stakeholders and key publics. Stakeholders are broad groups of individuals with similar characteristics who have a stake in the school. Some, in fact, are formally tied to the school (Enablers and Partners). Still others are individuals from whom the principal can seek advice and feedback (Friends). Most fall into a Silent Majority category that contains a cross-section of individuals, some of whom have ties to the school and some do not. Stakeholders fall into large categories, and not every person within a particular category is equally interested in an issue or problem facing the school. The degree of interest or involvement an individual has with the school regarding a problem determines his or her placement within a public.

Publics vary in that some have no interest in the school's issues or problems and they are a nonpublic. As such, communicating with them is a lower priority. A latent public is one that just does

not know about a school issue or problem and needs to be informed. An aware public is one that recognizes the problem or issue but for a variety of reasons has not yet organized to take any action on it. This is a key audience for the principal because, if ignored, it could easily become an active public on its own and bypass the principal in its information-seeking behavior. If a latent public goes out on its own to satisfy its need for information and does not rely on the principal, that is probably not in the school's best interests. In contrast, an active public has not only recognized the problem or issue but also discussed it, talked among itself about doing something about it, and mobilized to communicate in some way about it. By the time a public is active, it does the principal little good to communicate with it; the public has its mind pretty much made up. This is okay, of course, if the active public is already supportive of the school. It can be disastrous if it formed without the principal's involvement. A principal who is a leader of the active publics within the school's stakeholder groups probably has the communication management under control.

Among the school's stakeholders, aware and active publics dominate among the Enablers and Partners. This suggests that these are all high-priority targets for the principal's communication efforts. The Silent Majority, however, contains many stakeholders with whom the principal would like to be in regular communication but will find it difficult because they belong to latent publics. Finally, on some issues, stakeholders may split and form different publics.