

## Make an Impact

### **Hone your principal voice by listening, learning, and leading, as well as speaking for yourself.**

By Russell J. Quaglia and Peter DeWitt

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At a glance, it appears that the voices of principals are being heard. After all, from newsletters to staff meetings to professional development days to open houses, the “voice” of the principal seems to always be present. However, “present” doesn’t mean that the true voices of principals are being heard; it doesn’t mean that the voices of principals are making an impact.

Sometimes principals are merely delivering the messages of others. Leaders are, by role, the distributors of a great deal of important information about the school community. But ask yourself this question: In what ways is the authentic voice of the principal influential in leading and supporting growth schoolwide—not just speaking for the central office, but truly speaking for him- or herself. In that complicated relationship between district initiatives and individual to collective voices, how are leaders motivating stakeholders to collaborate and bring about growth among teachers and students?

### **The Many Sides of Leadership**

A principal’s role is complicated because it is multifaceted, and the responsibilities are numerous. Of all the items in a principal’s professional toolkit that support success, we think the most important is voice—a voice that is authentic, insightful, considerate, and confident. The voice can range, depending on the situation, from a whisper to a roar. Voice even involves listening more than we talk. However, volume and listening is of little consequence if the principal’s voice is not heard, valued, and influential.

Principals must be encouraged to share their voice and be listened to, learned from, and supported in their efforts to lead. We believe that the voice of the principal should be fostered to successfully lead in collaboration with others. However, one of the biggest misperceptions is that principals have a meaningful voice in their schools. In fact, many do not because they either haven’t found it or haven’t been given the permission to use it. They are merely given directives from those above them in the district office to uphold and implement.

Opportunities for principals’ voices to be heard do exist. No argument there. However, through the research at the Quaglia Institute for School Voice & Aspirations, we have come to learn that the voice of principals is not nearly as influential as it can and should be. Too often, “voice” for a principal is directly connected to dictating what needs to be done. Principals have positional power and the responsibility for hiring, firing, scheduling, evaluations, and budgets. But how much of that is control rather than meaningful influence?

Principals tell us they have very little opportunity to express their own ideas for improvement at their school, and they feel frustrated that their voice is not listened to or valued. Despite the power inherent in their positions, principals feel overscheduled and under-influential. One sentiment we often hear is: “I love being a principal. I only wish I could do more for my staff and students.” We have a very succinct response: You can.

The school voice model represents a process that allows you to develop your voice so that it is heard, respected, and recognized as advocating for meaningful change in your school. But it is important to note that even when leading, you must continue to listen and learn.

### **Listen**

Listening is not a passive act; it is more than hearing someone. Listening requires planning, openness, and a genuine interest in understanding the thoughts and ideas of those around you. Do you think you already do that? Our research shows that only “67% of staff believe principals are open to new ideas.” To truly lead collaboratively, you must be willing to:

- Listen to others, and honor their ideas and insights; and
- Listen with an open mind, which will enable you to better understand the individuals you work with, develop respectful and trusting relationships, and ultimately work together more effectively.

For this process to be effective, you must listen with your eyes, as well as your ears. What do you observe around you? Are students engaged in cooperative learning or are they merely involved in “cooperative seating” doing individual work? If you notice that a teacher is happy, upset, or frustrated, do you ask why and what you can do to better support him or her? Or do you ignore the situation?

Observe which opportunities elicit the most enthusiasm from parents. How can you capitalize on that and show parents you value their support and ideas? Likewise, when you read about local companies that give back to the community, reach out to them for opportunities to collaborate. As a principal, you need to take the initiative to let everyone in your learning community know you want to listen to and learn from them.

# Principal Voice Volume Control

## DECREASE

- Dictating
- Isolation in office
- Thinking I know best
- Managing behavior
- Perceiving people as complainers
- Focusing on testing and evaluation
- Engaging with the same people
- Canned speeches
- Reacting to policies
- Negotiating to get what you want

## INCREASE

- Collaborating
- Visibility in the building
- Knowing staff and students have something to teach me
- Encouraging responsibility
- Recognizing people as advocates for change
- Understanding people's hopes and dreams
- Being accessible to and learning from everyone
- Meaningful dialogue
- Maintaining commitment to the school's mission
- Collaborating to get what is best

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## Learn

As a leader, listening needs to be more than a polite gesture. The true value of listening is in learning from what you hear. Sadly, only 60 percent of staff believe the principal is willing to learn from them. Underpinning the successful development of your principal voice is the fundamental belief that people around you have something to teach you. The power of the principal is about reciprocal learning between principals and stakeholders. Regardless of age or years of experience, the people you work with embody expertise that you can learn from. You may learn from a veteran teacher a unique way to engage the community. You may learn from your support staff about a different perspective on the role of parents, as they, too, may be parents, aunts, uncles, or mentors. You may learn from students great ideas to make the learning environment more engaging.

One of the best ways to learn is to use your voice to raise questions that lead to deeper conversations. During the listening and learning stages, relationships are strengthened and greater trust is established.

## **Lead**

Listening and learning effectively build a solid foundation for you to lead; to use your voice with purpose in a way that creates meaningful change at your school. Using this process, you will be able to advocate for change based on the unique perspectives and experiences of your school community. If you effectively listen and learn from teachers, students, parents, and the community, your purpose and actions will be backed by the cumulative knowledge and experiences of these people. Your voice then becomes an effective tool to promote a collaborative process by which you lead.

As important as communication is to this whole process, only 48 percent of teachers believe teachers and administrators communicate effectively in schools. You can change this. Seek out the opinions of others, take the time to understand their points of view, and take action together. Create a stakeholder group that involves someone from each grade level or special area. As part of their formal goal-setting process, ask two teachers to act as co-chairs for the year so you are not responsible for running another meeting. Use the group as an open forum to make the school community stronger. It models collaboration and voice.

As the data suggest, there is room for improvement. There will be obstacles along the way, and that is to be expected. Maintaining respect and a commitment to the process will allow everyone to work through and learn from those obstacles, landing on the other side more informed and effective.

A principal with true voice is characterized as having the ability to speak openly and honestly in an environment that is driven by trust and responsibility. Using your voice is not only about sharing your own thoughts, but also eliciting and supporting the voice of others in the organization. Principal voice is about leading with purpose in a manner that motivates action: listen to the people around you, learn from what is being said, and lead with everyone's best interests in mind.

You have the opportunity and the responsibility to be the agent of change. Your voice must connect with those of students and teachers so that everyone can reach their full potential.

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