

Keep Calm and Communicate On

by Ardith Shirley, NBTA Staff Officer

A friend of mine sent a note to me recently on a card that was a replication of the “Keep Calm and Carry On” phenomena that has become part of our pop culture. The original bright red poster was part of a series of three that were created by the British during wartime and were intended to strengthen the morale of the British people.

While I certainly wouldn’t compare the morale in our schools to that of the times of Churchill, I do find that at this time of year, teachers admit to feeling just a wee bit “shell shocked” from the multitude of demanding daily interactions required by our profession.

As our school year progresses, I believe that our students, families, and teachers of **all** stages ride a wave quite similar to that depicted in the research on beginning teachers:



http://www.weac.org/professional_resources/new_teacher_resources/beg_handbook/phases.aspx

Given these suggested stages, it would seem obvious that November, December and January are the months when there is an increased possibility of negative conflict and miscommunication amongst the members of our school community. Add on the communication requirements of report cards and home and school conferences and it would seem that the “time is ripe”.

Considering this, I have taken some liberties in creating a “special” NBTA version of the British original that

reinforces the first of several communication tips that I think might be helpful as we negotiate the Disillusionment Phase:

Susan Scott, author of *FIERCE Conversations*, contends that “the conversation IS the relationship” and that as long as people are communicating there IS a relationship to be salvaged. This idea was reinforced when a friend who does couples counselling told me that he always maintains hope of improving the relationship as long as people are fighting - “It is when they don’t care enough to even fight anymore that I begin to think things are past a salvageable point.”

As teachers, I believe there is a lesson to be learned. Of course in our professional lives we will inevitably have individual interactions with students, their parents and our colleagues that will not go as planned. In some cases, they may be downright unpleasant. The important thing is not to give up and to re-engage in the conversation when cooler heads prevail - to “Keep Calm and Communicate On”. In those times:

Do remember that how you say something counts for just as much as what you say. Tone does matter. Think how many emails, bereft of tone, are misunderstood.

Don’t let situations fester. Communicate with students, parents or colleagues during the initial phases of a brewing crisis. Don’t wait until a full-blown crisis occurs.

Keep an open-mind. Don’t let yourself get into arguments. Discuss things with people rather than argue. If you don’t agree with something, think your response through and don’t be argumentative or judgmental in what you say.



Quote

“The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”
- George Bernard Shaw

Don't use jargon when communicating. The field of education certainly has an impressive list of ever-changing technical terms. You may dazzle a parent who is a plumber, veterinarian or accountant by using terms like "criterion reference assessment" ...but trust they could do the same.

Some teachers unintentionally (or intentionally?) confuse parents by using overly technical language. If you must use a technical term, define it!

Don't attempt to defend the indefensible. There may come a situation where you, a colleague or "the system" makes a mistake. Considering the myriad of responsibilities that we all have, such situations are inevitable.

Do not become defensive or argumentative when faced with such a situation. Do not attempt to construct a defense with a series of excuses or rationales.

Merely apologize for the error and express your regret for the situation. Outline steps that will be taken to prevent a re-occurrence. Sincere apologies are not a reflection of weakness or incompetence.

ALWAYS be ready to explain what strategies you've already used to address the issue and what new strategies you are considering, when presenting a concern. People don't want concerns dropped in their laps without at least a tentative action plan. Remember you are the professional when it comes to learning.

Don't make a promise that you are not prepared (or able) to keep! When you tell someone that you intend to do something, it is your responsibility to see to it that you follow through.

Do remember that families often go through a series of unpredictable "stages" as they attempt to accept and understand their child.

Although many of these stages are positive in nature, families also deal with anger, guilt, denial, depression, envy, isolation and flight. As a result, parents may on occasion be difficult to deal with and may treat you in an inappropriate manner. It is important to remember that life is a difficult and challenging journey. Take their behavior seriously, but don't take it personally.

Don't worry about accolades. Do your best. It's the best you can do. Let others see your work ethic and you will be able to take pride and pleasure in a job well done.

Remember tomorrow is another day. Don't get discouraged when a more heated exchange occurs. Re-engaging in conversation and communication after a bit of time for reflection can actually result in a stronger understanding of each other's viewpoint.

May I Recommend?

A great article appears in the October issue of *Educational Leadership* (Pg. 40-43) "**Call me Different, Not Difficult**" by John Elder Robison who is the parent of a child with Asperger Syndrome and lives with autism himself. He writes this article to offer some advice to teachers from both his student and parent perspective. Definitely worth a read!

I also enjoyed "**The X Factor is 'Why'**" in the *JSD Journal* (Pg. 20-25). Author Anne Conzemius takes a strong stand on collecting data for data's sake and reminds all of us that we need to know and understand the WHY before we bother to collect at all. To do otherwise is a waste of precious resources.

Young People's Confidence in School, Community, and the Future: Why It Matters and What We Can Do About It by Christa Freiler appears in the Fall 2012 of the *Canadian Education Association Journal* is an excellent exploration of a Canadian research project conducted in Ontario that looked at young people's confidence in their learning environments and the impact that has on their future.

Should any of the above catch your attention, drop me a line! I would be happy to send a copy to you.

Book Give-Away!

Congratulations to Bliss Hanson of Woodlawn Learning Centre in Saint John who will be receiving a copy of "**Managing Diverse Classrooms**"! This month's draw will be for a copy of "**Assignments Matter**" by Eleanor Dougherty. To enter drop me an email with the Subject Line "BOOK DRAW" by December 21st.

