

Not another x?!@ interruption

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Although this article seems to be about communication, it's also about systems. Efficient communication systems and protocols are the oil in the machinery of a well-run school.

For instance, school secretaries are generally the first port of call for a visitor or phone call. If they don't know where to find people, or what's going on in the day-to-day life of their school it makes not only them but also the school look disorganised and unprofessional.

But how to let everyone on staff know where everyone is and any special events – that can be a can of worms.

Just let me get on with my teaching

I was running a time management course for a big primary school. The whole staff attended. At one stage I invited contributions from everyone as to their biggest challenges with time.

More than half the group said, quite emphatically, “People coming in and out of my classroom all the time.”

Lewis the principal listened with considerable interest. “How many interruptions do you typically have?” he asked. “Sometimes three or four a period,” was the general response.

Lewis looked both shocked and very thoughtful. Clearly he was sometimes the culprit but the office staff were also in the habit of delivering messages whenever they arrived, either themselves or by using any other legs going in that direction. Possible solutions started to flow.

Another “Pet Peeve” of many teachers is the loudspeaker booming out information in their classrooms. Sure it's efficient, but if your school uses one, table it as a staff meeting topic to check whether everyone's happy with the way it's used.

Set some protocols about who uses it, when it's used, how often, and for what purpose. It is very disconcerting to be in the middle of something and suddenly, with no warning, to have a booming and disembodied voice talking over the top of students and teachers. The best-used loudspeaker systems have set times for use, say just before bell time or a few minutes after the period has commenced. Then no one jumps out of their skin at its unexpectedness and, on a more subliminal level, people can settle to their work knowing there will be no interruptions of that type.

The teachers want their messages, but what they don't want (just like the administrative staff) are lots of interruptions when they're focused and busy. The worst way and most inefficient way – for all parties – was what Lewis's school was doing – delivering messages when they came in, at random times throughout the day.



Other strategies

A pin board in the staffroom. The messages should be folded over, with just the person's name showing

Messages in pigeon holes (cubby holes), if the staffroom is near the office

The secretary gives messages out at morning tea and lunch and anything not delivered then is put in the pigeon holes

A carbon copy message book. The top copy is sent by your preferred method and the bottom copy stays in the office as a paper trail, a cross-reference, or sometimes a solution for “I know you sent me a message but I've lost the number.”

A Day Book

The Day Book method works well for primary and intermediate schools, probably not quite as well in schools where not all teachers are in classrooms for every period. It's sent round to every class every morning with absences, messages or anything of general interest. Some schools send it from 9–9.20 am. The benefit is that the teachers haven't gone too far into their day's teaching programme before they have an interruption, plus everyone knows it will happen at that time. What's expected can be adjusted for. Once it returns to the office it's then left in the staffroom for all teachers to refer to. Anything further, unless it's a dire emergency, is distributed at breaks.

Keeping part-timers informed

Despite the best will in the world, part-timers have to work extra hard to keep up with school information. (This I remember from my days as a part-time school assistant many years ago!)

The most critical factor is that someone has responsibility for recording the relevant

information so that part-timers aren't always behind the ball.

It could be the principal or a senior teacher who records academic things and an office staffer who records other matters – special events, functions coming up, sports days, teacher-only days, issues of community interest or concern and where or from whom they can get the full story... whatever staff might find interesting or may need to know.

Perhaps you'll use the Day Book mentioned above to manage this communication. Then the part-timer only has to spend a few minutes skimming through and they've got a reasonable handle on events. Other schools use the Staff Noticeboard for this purpose.

Miscommunication or lack of communication is the fastest way to have unhappy staff. And close behind is disgruntlement about irrelevant and thoughtless interruptions. They're high on everybody's hit list of annoying time wasters – from the administration and support staff to the principal.

Think before you interrupt – is there a less disruptive and more effective way to get this message delivered. (And I'm NOT saying that email is the only answer. Used wrongly, it's just as bad). **ET**



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