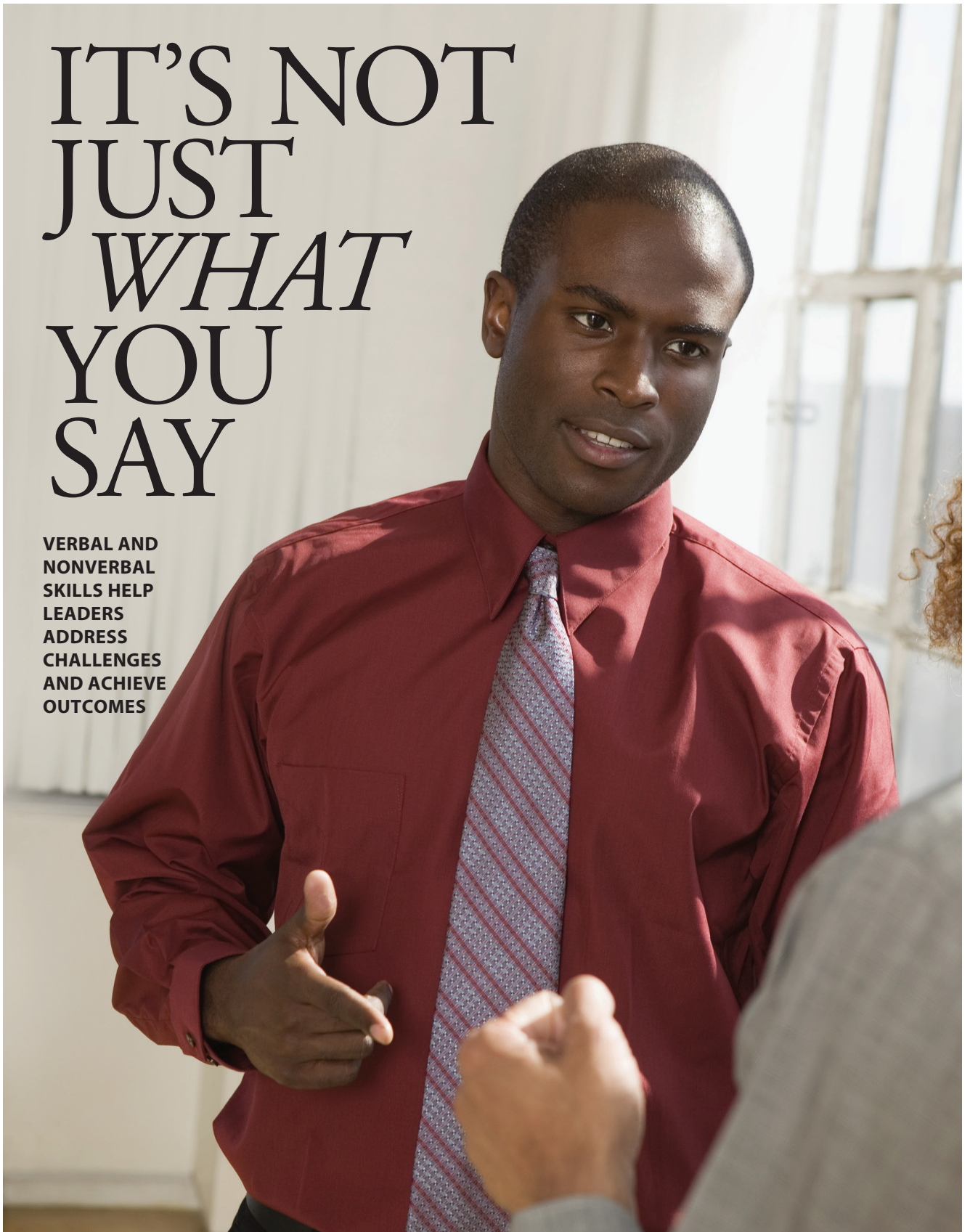


IT'S NOT JUST *WHAT* YOU SAY

**VERBAL AND
NONVERBAL
SKILLS HELP
LEADERS
ADDRESS
CHALLENGES
AND ACHIEVE
OUTCOMES**



By Kendall Zoller, Antonia Issa Lahera, and Anthony H. Normore

This is a story about two school leaders in a large Southern California urban district who used skills developed in a university school leadership program to create rapport, empathy, and trust while leading through challenging situations and achieving actionable outcomes.

In addition to developing relationships in support of collaboration (Duke, 2008), these leaders also changed the culture of their schools by intentionally impacting a shift in values from an existing state to a new desired state.

Since values drive behaviors (Wagner & Simpson, 2008), shifting the values in their schools resulted in changes in behaviors that promote collaboration and student achievement.

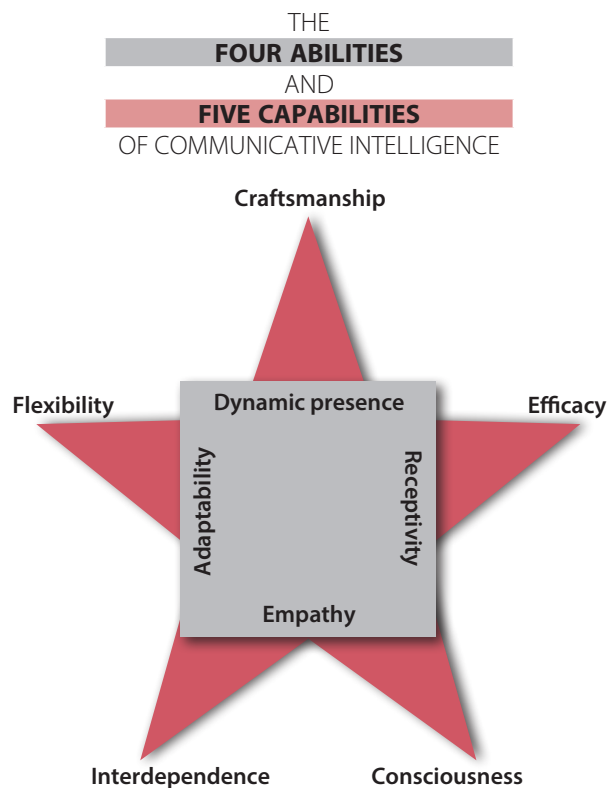
We refer to these two real-life scenarios as “The \$250,000 Zinger” and “Cold Mountain Disaster.”

THE \$250,000 ZINGER

“My first full school year in administration was perhaps the most financially challenging for public schools in California, with significant cuts made to school funding,” the novice leader said. “This came on the heels of already challenging years in which the school had to cut back. The school was going to receive \$250,000 less in funding than the previous year, and those monies had to be cut from the budget. This was bad news, and I was the messenger.”

This leader was faced with the challenge of how to deliver the budget news in a way that promoted collaboration and trust while reducing frustration, blame, and the potential chasm between school administration and staff.

To accomplish this, he drew on what he’d learned at a school leadership program at California State University Dominguez Hills in Southern California. The program focused on several pathways for developing leaders, two of which are significant to this story: adaptive leadership



(Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) and communicative intelligence (Zoller, 2015).

Adaptive leadership is grounded in the idea that existing issues in organizations fall short in current knowledge, skills, abilities, and values used to resolve complex issues in schools. New knowledge, skills, abilities, and, most importantly, a shift in existing values and beliefs are necessary for creating solutions. Adaptive leadership guides leaders on how best to shift to a culture that embraces conflict and innovation.

However, adaptive leadership alone is not sufficient.

Leaders must also develop what is called communicative intelligence because communication is at the core of leading. Communicative intelligence incorporates the states of mind (Costa & Garmston, 2002) with several cross-cultural verbal and nonverbal patterns of communication (Zoller, 2015).

Communicative intelligence is the cognitive and emotional thought processes that determine the elements of verbal and nonverbal communication. Within these cognitive and emotional thought processes are five capabilities: craftsmanship, efficacy, consciousness, interdependence, and flexibility (see illustration on p. 35).

Craftsmanship is the “what” of communication and includes gestures, pausing, stance, location, voice tone and pitch, breathing, paraphrasing, and probing. The works of Zoller (2008, 2015) and Zoller and Landry (2010) identify more than 50 patterns.

Efficacy is the belief that you can navigate the situations in front of you, no matter how challenging the topic or the relationships.

Consciousness is the link necessary to access the other capabilities. Consciousness includes self-awareness of what verbal and nonverbal skills you are using as well as awareness of incoming verbal and nonverbal messages from those with whom you are communicating.

Interdependence is knowing you are integral to the system as well as awareness of your connection to other systems. For instance, as a principal, your systems include school, classroom, district, and community.

Flexibility is the ability to adapt and adjust in the moment as communication unfolds. Imagine a kayaker on a whitewater ride, planning and executing in a dynamic and adaptive environment.

The four abilities in the square of the illustration on p. 35 — receptivity, empathy, adaptability, and dynamic presence — can be considered the “how” of communication.

Receptivity refers to the communication skills that influence the person you are talking with to be more receptive to your message.

In this case, the leader carefully choreographed his message to ensure that staff would remain open and resourceful in their thinking. He wrote the message on an easel and placed the easel on the side of the room, creating space between himself and the message.

He used a flat voice tone and pitch when talking about the budget cut, and his voice was rhythmic and inviting when talking with staff, creating a sense of inclusion and invitation to participate.

Empathy is the perception of being listened to and understood while, at the same time, having a deep emotional connection with the other person. Empathy is a key element in social intelligence (Goleman, 2006).

To achieve empathy, the leader displayed mindfulness. “I

view mindfulness as the process of listening, acknowledging, and then responding to teachers and staff by paraphrasing and anticipating objections and concerns,” he said. “I believe this mindset was the most critical single large-scale component that, along with the communication skills taught and implemented, made me a better communicator across multiple modalities. This really helped create and foster an environment of collaboration rather than confrontation.”

Adaptability is the use of communication skills to navigate across organizational and individual cultures. As a school leader, our storyteller was part of the school culture, yet independent of the individual culture of teachers and departments. He had to create a culture of connectedness, which he did by paraphrasing, using the easel to separate the message from the messenger, and acknowledging others’ emotions.

Dynamic presence is ability to navigate in the moment. The administrator had to act in the moment as emotions flowed.

“I considered possibilities and ideas that would work with least impact to students and staff,” he said. “I planned on focusing on doing what’s best for students and staff. I considered which staff might be upset or more vocally hostile and how I might address them. I think I spent nearly two hours preparing for a 30-minute meeting.

“Ultimately, the meeting was one of the best I ever conducted. I listened to and acknowledged their concerns and frustrations. The cut in funding was externalized, and blame didn’t enter our group. Instead, everyone took on a solution-focused approach and appreciated being included in the decision-making process.

“This more inclusive approach, a high level of transparency, and frequent and clear communication promoted an environment that allowed staff to focus on students and, ultimately, continually improve their outcomes.”

This school leader used elements from adaptive leadership that include thinking politically (considering the multiple perspectives of a diverse staff), orchestrating conflict (placing the issue in the room yet separate from the messenger), and turning up the heat (collaboratively working with staff to develop an array of potential solutions).

He used communicative intelligence to plan (craftsmanship, efficacy, consciousness, interdependence) the 30-minute meeting. As the meeting progressed, he used the elements of communicative intelligence to navigate a meeting that ended with a collective focus on students rather than the budget.

THE COLD MOUNTAIN DISASTER

Sometimes we walk into a situation with a feeling of angst telling us it isn’t going to go well. An assistant principal tells one such story about a difficult meeting with a parent who was unhappy with the outcome.

In a follow-up meeting, the assistant principal — another

novice school leader — implemented several elements of communicative intelligence. She reframed the issue and intentionally developed enough rapport and empathy with the parent to gain the level of trust necessary to provide support for her child.

“Last year, I encountered a very confrontational parent whose child needed a lot of support, both in academics and behavior,” the assistant principal said. “Even though I knew this parent well, and we had had many meetings throughout the year in my office about her child, I worried that the news of a recommended assessment for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for the child would be a difficult conversation to have, and it was.

“The parent sat, surrounded by teachers, administrators, and school resource teacher, listening to everything that was wrong with her daughter and how the school knew best how to design and deliver support. The breaking point was the recommendation for testing that the parent believed was eventual determination of the special education label to be placed on her daughter.”

The meeting did not go well and ended with no recommendation or solution. The assistant principal asked the parent to come in later that week to meet one-on-one. The parent agreed, and the assistant principal knew she had to plan carefully. Communicative intelligence would be crucial in this second meeting.

This administrator orchestrated the conversation with conscious and deliberate intent. She sat at a 90-degree angle to the parent so she could see her body movements (consciousness and dynamic presence). She gained rapport by matching the parent's breathing as well as her language and emotional energy.

She showed empathy by tilting her head to the side in agreement. When stating her reasons for wanting to assess the student, she displayed a firm demeanor, shifting her head upright when addressing the data.

She gestured toward three locations on the table to identify and separate the reasons from solutions. “I said, ‘Your child needs an evaluation for the following reasons: It will give us insight into what your child needs (first location), your child will be able to receive services free of charge that may help improve both academics and behavior (second location), and your child will not be moved into a special day class if there is a special education need (third location).’”

The assistant principal used those same three locations as she stated her goals for the student.

When the parent felt pressured, the assistant principal turned down the heat (a tactic from adaptive leadership) by providing a structure and timeline of events and what everyone's role would be: “We can test your child in the next two weeks. The following people will be involved in the assessment. The results will be communicated to you by X date in a face-to-face meeting with me. Any decisions about special education placements can wait until we receive the results of the evaluation.

Your only role as a parent to start is to give consent and continue communicating with us your needs and that of your child.”

The parent agreed to the assessment, and the results showed that the child showed signs of a learning disability. The student now has supports in place and services to help him succeed and adapt.

The mindfulness this leader displayed exemplifies a highly proficient level of communicative intelligence. Her ability to use communicative intelligence in real time resulted in an outcome that might not have been achieved otherwise.

NAVIGATING CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

These two stories show that leading and communicating are deliberate and conscious choices. The framework of communicative intelligence identifies the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements of communication necessary to navigate the challenging situations school leaders face daily in their complex environment.

One of the graduates of the school leadership program, an assistant principal, put it best when she said, “Communication is the basis from which relationships are made, teamwork is established, and clarity around goals and responsibilities is given. Without successful communication skills, even the most knowledgeable leader can lose support from his or her team.”

Another graduate said, “I must consciously use techniques [from communicative intelligence] to ensure that students feel listened to and acknowledged. Most frequently, students are primarily upset because they do not feel they had the opportunity to explain their side and were instead judged prematurely. In order to allow students the space and environment to share their own story, I paraphrase to convey that I am following along (and can later use that information to share with parents). The entire conversation is carefully orchestrated to maintain rapport while also gathering the information needed to make decisions about consequences or next steps.”

Communication is an essential skill set for school leaders to navigate the whitewater rapids created by the complex and chaotic nature of daily life in schools. Communicative intelligence is a way of thinking and acting that, when woven into a leader's internal fabric, can result in an adaptive culture focused on student achievement.

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Navigation aids

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CLEARLY A NEED

Five cohorts later, 80 Georgia leaders have demonstrated their growth in the program outcomes. The competitive application process does not reward central office experience. The cohorts are about 50% principals and 50% central office leaders. This mix has been crucial to the program's success.

Since the first cohort in 2009, a nationwide conversation about central office leadership has surfaced (Honig et. al, 2010). The Wallace Foundation made a significant investment in principal preparation (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2013).

Since that time, additional funds have been included to highlight the importance of principal supervision and district leadership. Georgia's Gwinnett County Public Schools developed both leadership and aspiring principals programs. In 2013, these programs included a cohort of central office leaders, highlighting the district's commitment to building high-quality district leaders.

When these nine shifts are negotiated artfully, program graduates move from being an expert to sharing expertise. With these supports, a career path to district leadership is clear, relevant, and attractive. District leaders with these new skill sets make a difference for schools and the children those buildings serve.

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As a school leader, could often work with just one contact. As a district leader, Frannie Johannsen needs to amass a web of contacts and possibilities.