

STEADY VOICES IN TIMES OF CHANGE

THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN MOMENTS OF CRISIS

Jack Myers explains why a crisis-related communications strategy needs to be carefully navigated to keep key stakeholders on-side.

The independent school sector is no stranger to change with recent VAT reforms and other pressures exacerbating the need for many institutions to adapt to an evolving landscape. From consideration of mergers, sales and closures to leadership transitions and emergency-driven adjustments – such as the rapid pivot to remote learning during the pandemic – schools must remain agile and adept at navigating complex transformations. Each type of change brings unique challenges, not least in communications, where clarity, timing and empathy can make the difference between maintaining stakeholder trust or suffering irreversible reputational damage.

Understanding the spectrum of change

Change in schools can take many forms. Structural changes, such as moving to a co-educational model or merging with another institution, demand careful messaging around inclusivity, continuity and shared values. Leadership transitions, whether sudden or planned, require reassurance that academic standards and pastoral care will remain stable. Emergency-driven change – such as the sudden adoption of remote learning – adds another layer of complexity, testing internal communications, technological readiness and stakeholder confidence. Even closures, often the result of financial pressures, demand a sensitive, highly coordinated approach to deliver difficult news with empathy. ►

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: DOS AND DON'TS

Do:

- ✓ Collaborate with legal and HR from the start
- ✓ Identify key stakeholders and tailor messaging accordingly
- ✓ Consider timing and sequencing carefully
- ✓ Ensure legal complexities are explained clearly
- ✓ Provide channels for feedback and questions
- ✓ Reinforce benefits of change, where possible
- ✓ Prepare contingency communications for potential leaks or escalations

Don't:

- ✗ Rush announcements without internal alignment
- ✗ Fail to prepare for difficult questions
- ✗ Rely on technical jargon or abstract language to avoid direct communication
- ✗ Treat communications as a one-off event rather than an ongoing dialogue



Whatever the change, communications must be strategic. Parents, staff, alumni, and pupils interpret signals not just from formal announcements but from everyday conversations, internal memos and WhatsApp groups. Missteps can quickly escalate concerns into reputational risks, particularly in a sector where trust is paramount.

Reputational risk in the sector

Independent schools operate in an environment where reputation is closely tied to enrolment and long-term viability. Poorly managed communications can trigger enrolment declines, staff attrition, or negative media coverage. Even if the underlying business decision is unavoidable, how the message is conveyed influences whether stakeholders perceive it as credible.

Reputational risk arises not just from the content of the message but from its delivery. Generic, boilerplate communications, overly technical memos, or late disclosures can all undermine confidence. Conversely, a carefully structured communications plan, developed whilst headspace

is clear, demonstrates competence, transparency and care – reinforcing the school's credibility even amid challenging circumstances.

Messaging to key stakeholders

Effective communications start with identifying key audiences and tailoring messages, including the level of detail required to address their concerns. Parents want reassurance about educational quality, continuity and pastoral care. Staff need clarity on job security, reporting lines and operational changes. Pupils respond best to age-appropriate explanations, while donors may need context on the strategic rationale.

Building consensus among these groups involves a careful balancing act: acknowledging concerns, providing concrete information and, if appropriate, highlighting benefits without downplaying difficulties.

Setting up effective communication channels

Dialogue is central to successful change management. There are a variety of channels at a school's disposal, including face-to-face briefings, email updates, dedicated web pages and Q&A sessions. Having a strong grasp of which channel(s) to engage will



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help manage stakeholder expectations and reduce the risk of these key players turning to unofficial channels outside the school's field of vision.

Feedback loops are equally important. Collecting and analysing stakeholder responses can reveal misunderstandings, areas of concern and potential risks, allowing the leadership team to adjust messaging or provide additional support where needed.

Avoiding negative framing

Language matters. Negative framing emphasising loss or uncertainty can magnify anxiety. Even in difficult situations, messaging should focus on constructive narratives: the benefits of collaboration, mitigation measures and safeguards in place and, perhaps most importantly, the continuity of educational standards. By choosing words carefully, schools can secure stakeholder engagement and minimise the risk of escalation.

Timing announcements and managing leaks

Timing is critical. While announcement schedules are often contingent on legal timetables, many schools fail to consider what else stakeholders will be dealing with when they receive the announcement. Indeed, news delivered before the weekend or holidays is more likely to agitate stakeholders as well as putting the school in a challenging position should questions need to be answered urgently outside working hours. It's also important to consider message

sequencing, ensuring stakeholders are informed of important news in the right order.

Schools must also be prepared for potential leaks. Having pre-approved statements, difficult questions considered with answers prepared and contingency plans in place will ensure that any breach of confidentiality can be addressed without losing control of the narrative.

Collaboration with legal and HR teams

Change communications are rarely developed without legal and HR input. Legal and HR teams will provide essential guidance on legal and regulatory compliance as well as risk mitigation. Early collaboration with the communications team will ensure that messaging doesn't expose a school to legal risk. Indeed, collaboration is particularly crucial in scenarios involving consultations where missteps could have serious legal as well as reputational consequences.

Post-change follow-up

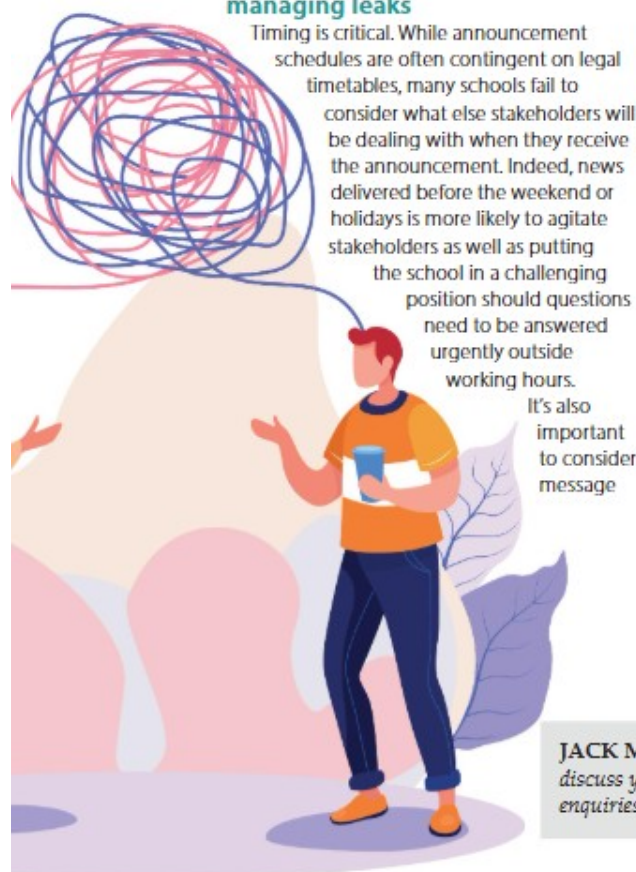
Communications do not end with an announcement. Following up is essential both to reinforce the rationale underlying an action and to address ongoing questions or concerns. Post-change updates can highlight tangible outcomes and showcase achievements, consolidating trust and building stakeholder confidence.

A structured follow-up also provides an opportunity to reflect on lessons learned, refine communications strategies and embed best practices for future change initiatives. In doing so, schools demonstrate accountability and commitment to their communities.

Navigation

Change is inevitable in today's independent school sector, whether driven by strategy, circumstance or crisis; yet how a school communicates these changes can significantly affect perceptions, morale and reputation.

Ultimately, effective communication not only supports operational goals but strengthens trust, sustains engagement and preserves a school's long-term reputation. By planning carefully, schools can minimise the risks inherent in navigating change. ●



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