CHAPTER 2

···························

COMPETENCE

The Language and Skills of Leaders

You've heard the phrase "leading by walking around," but maybe that should be changed to "leading by *talking* around." Much of the work of leaders is accomplished through conversation. In meetings, school hallways, and brief discussions with people throughout the day, we lead. In fact, one study estimated that oral communication makes up 70% of a principal's workday (Bredeson, 1987). Talk is the vehicle for how educational leadership is accomplished. It is the dominant channel for how we transmit our goodwill, our trustworthiness, and our expertise. There's a sobering statistic that represents the other side of the coin: superintendents of Texas school districts cited "fail to communicate or build positive relationships" as the most common reason principals were involuntarily separated from schools (Davila et al., 2012, p. 7). Stated more directly, trustworthiness and communication competence are essential skills leaders must master.

Before going further, we invite you to self-assess your competence as a leader. We encourage you to reflect on actions you have taken *in the last 30 days* to invest in your competence as a leader (see Figure 2.1).

FIGURE 2.1 COMPETENCE SELF-ASSESSMENT

COMPETENCE					
ITEM #	SURVEY ITEM	3 ALWAYS	2 SOMETIMES	1 RARELY	0 NEVER
1.	I invest in my own self-development and strive to stay current on research for effective teaching and leading.				
2.	I demonstrate strong instructional leadership through well-organized, purposeful conversations with teachers about evidence-based teaching and learning practices.				
3.	I strive to provide clarity on instructional practices that work best, and I provide feedback based on success criteria.				
4.	I prioritize time for daily classroom visits where I engage in conversations about teaching and learning with staff and students.				
5.	I drop in on PLC meetings to offer support and guidance to teams.				

COMPETENCE					
ITEM #	SURVEY ITEM	3 ALWAYS	2 SOMETIMES	1 RARELY	0 NEVER
6.	I seek and act on feedback from staff, students, and parents to improve the effectiveness of my leadership.				
Mean for Competence *(Total divided by 6)*					

REAL REFLECTION

Which of the indicators of competence are strengths for you?

Which of the indicators present growth opportunities?

What conclusions are you drawing about your perceived competence?

Whom can you enlist to support you in strengthening your competence and thus building your credibility?

THE RESEARCH ON COMPETENCE

The literature on leader competence comes in two strands: communication competence and skill competence. We'll take on the first strand before discussing the second. Trust and communication competence go hand in hand. In fact, a higher degree of trust between staff and leaders can result in more efficient communication as it "reduces the number of transactions among employees necessary to complete tasks" (Sutherland & Yoshida, 2015, p. 1039). When trust is solid, things get done faster and better.

Keeping in mind that the majority of a principal's workday is devoted to oral communication, it is somewhat surprising that

the specific talk moves used by leaders aren't more thoroughly discussed. While the educational leadership research is replete with advice about the importance of "open communication," less has been developed on what this actually looks and sounds like. One study, a comparison of a measure of trust between principals and teachers and a measure of the principal's oral competence, found that coordination of attentiveness was the primary factor (Sutherland & Yoshida, 2021). The research showed that a principal's attention to sharing air time with the teacher (not dominating the space), sustaining the interaction to keep the discussion going, and managing interruptions proved to be important contributors to trust.

The second strand is skill competence, which is the perception that a leader has the requisite knowledge and implements it to improve conditions. This is accomplished not by displaying framed degrees in your office but rather by putting skills into action. Having said that, you can't fully separate communication from skills; verbal and written language is central to action. Effective leaders use three types of leader speech: direction-giving language, empathetic language, and meaning-making language to spark action, build relationships, and communicate the reasoning behind decisions (Sullivan, 1988). Together, these three speech types constitute motivating language theory (MLT), a communication theory about how leaders use talk to improve an organization. In their review of MLT, Holmes and Parker (2018, pp. 437–438) offer examples of the use of each of these speech types in schools:

- **Direction-giving language** clarifies and reduces uncertainty, focuses teachers on goals and objectives, increases teacher and staff knowledge and information, and provides feedback and rewards. Principals use direction-giving language, for example, during post-observation conversations with teachers to clarify teaching expectations, provide suggestions for improvement, and deliver rewarding instructional feedback.

- **Empathetic language** values teachers and staff as human beings, not objects; emphasizes concern and consideration; reinforces trust; influences effort through encouragement and praise; and guides individual

professional development. Principals use empathetic language, for instance, in the delegation of professional development to instructional coaches and their expressions of support, encouragement, praise, and concern for job satisfaction during planning and debriefing sessions with them.

- **Meaning-making language** assists teachers in finding meaning at work; assists school employees in understanding the school culture (especially the unwritten cultural rules); supports personal employee vision alignment with school/district vision; increases teacher effectiveness during change and induction periods; and shows appreciation for successful school employee efforts. Principals use meaning-making language, for example, during staff meetings to recognize exemplary teacher behavior as a means to reinforce appropriate school culture behaviors as well as during leadership team meetings describing the behaviors of struggling teachers along with discussing methods of support and intervention for them.

In their review of the research on motivating language usage by principals, Holmes and Parker noted that the skilled use of these speech types accomplishes three important goals linked to credibility: (1) establishing goodwill (benevolence) (2) trustworthiness, and (3) competence. This last feature of motivational language is crucial for instructional leadership; when "teachers believe the administrator knows little about pedagogy [expertness and knowledge]; . . . the principal's suggestions [leadership ability] for improving teaching performance are ignored" (2018, p. 441).

From the standpoint of teachers, much of an administrator's skill competence is demonstrated in the use of motivational language but is best translated as working conditions. Leaders are variously charged with overseeing and managing operations, resource allocation, curricular decisions, and supports. Working conditions are defined as teacher time use, physical environment, teacher empowerment/school leadership, and professional development (Burkhauser, 2017).

Using a large data set from North Carolina, Burkhauser examined relationships between a measure of teacher empowerment

Do not copy, post, or distribute

and their reports on their working conditions. Not surprisingly, in schools where good working conditions attributable to the principal existed, teacher turnover was low. In schools where principal-attributed working conditions were poor, teacher turnover was high. Recommendations from the researchers to districts included assessing teachers' perceptions of working conditions and strengthening the skills and communication competence of principals.

COMPETENCE FOR PROVIDING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

The ability to provide feedback to others depends on a measure of communication competence. Turning to the world of business, consider that a study of the role of communication credibility for 477 full-time employees found that trustworthiness, goodwill (benevolence), and the ability to communicate with clarity were essential for the feedback to "stick" (Kingsley Westerman et al., 2018). Perhaps of most interest (and a segue into the second kind of competence) was that the source credibility was a mediating factor. In other words, the skill competence of the supervisor played a deciding role in whether the feedback was accepted or not.

No doubt you have used the phrase "consider the source" when you have heard something you do not accept. That's what source credibility is. When receiving feedback, one of the factors the recipient weighs, whether a student or a staff member, is the degree to which they believe the provider has the expert knowledge to give it. If the recipient decides the provider does not have that knowledge, the feedback is dismissed. If the recipient decides the provider has the expertise, the likelihood that the feedback with be accepted is increased. We'll discuss source credibility in more detail in Chapter 3, but for now, suffice to say that source credibility is a conceptual bridge between communication competence and skill competence.

It's important to state that, left to our own tendencies, we'll stay within our comfort zone. Former English teachers who are now leaders tend to spend more time in English classrooms, while an administrator with credentials in physical education might give more attention to the athletics program.

Secondary mathematics teachers and special education teachers routinely report receiving less instructional guidance from administrators who feel that they aren't experts and therefore avoid getting more involved. But as leaders, it is essential for us to be aware of where our knowledge gaps lie and take steps to improve our knowledge.

No matter how competent we are in terms of credentials and licensure, we can't be experts to all people in every aspect of their jobs. Christopher Milton, principal of a busy elementary school, was aware of this when he met with the transportation director of his district. Mr. Milton's school was located in an urban area, on a corner of two streets with high traffic and no shoulders. There was metered parking on the streets, and families picking up and dropping off students presented a backup onto the city streets. Recently, police started ticketing cars idling in line on the public streets for blocking traffic.

The elementary principal knew he was not a traffic and safety expert, but he did have knowledge of the demands families face before and after school. In preparation for the meeting, he spoke with several families who transported their children to and from school. In addition, he met with the crossing guards who worked the morning and afternoon shifts to gain their perspectives. In addition, he familiarized himself with the municipal regulations concerning traffic control.

The transportation director, Alberto Gomez, started the meeting by expressing his frustration about the situation. He began to lecture Mr. Milton about the problems he was facing: "I got another phone call from the chief [of police] yesterday. This is not what I need." However, Mr. Milton was able to change the tenor of the discussion pretty rapidly when he shared with the director the fact-finding he had completed prior to the meeting. After presenting, Mr. Milton said, "I think we can arrive at a good solution for all involved. You've definitely got the expertise about how this situation can be improved. You redesigned the drop-off and pick-up procedures for Lincoln Elementary, right? The principal there told me how much of an improvement it has been. I'd like to run some ideas by you so we can figure this out."

▶ Mr. Milton set about building his knowledge so he could provide good feedback in his meeting with the transportation director. How do you build expertise to give and receive good feedback in situations where you don't have as much existing knowledge?

COMPETENCE IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Conflict management requires a high degree of communication and skill competence. All school organizations have conflict, and leaders must manage how conflict is addressed and managed within and across teams. Think about it this way—much of the talk that occurs between leaders and staff are low-level negotiations that seek to manage conflict. Blake and Moulton (1964) sought to define conflict as being something more than two extremes: competing, meaning that there is a winner and a loser; or avoiding, in hopes that the conflict will somehow resolve itself. They expanded the continuum to include five styles, which Shell, writing in the *Negotiation Journal* further defined:

- **Competing orientation:** A dominant, high concern for the self's goals and associated desire to limit the other's results

- **Collaborating orientation:** A balanced, high level of concern for self's and other's goals and results

- **Compromising orientation:** A balanced, moderate level of concern for both self and the other

- **Accommodating orientation:** A dominant, high concern for the other's goals without much concern for the self

- **Avoiding orientation:** A disinclination toward placing the self in conflict with others to pursue any goals at all (Shell, 2001, p. 159)

Disagreement is a part of any team, and a degree of disagreement is necessary to innovate and engage in meaningful change. However, conflict can be more destructive. Many conflicts within organizations have root causes related to differences in values, goals, and tasks (Van De Vliert, 1998), and these underlying root causes of conflict are exacerbated by circumstances influenced by the leader, including

- **Problems in communication,** including a lack of openness, lack of responsiveness, and withholding information

- **Role ambiguity** through lack of clarity about job responsibilities

- **Incompatible goals** that prevent another goal from being achieved

- **Conflict of interest** when limited resources require groups to fight for their own share

- **Differences in values** due to lack of consensus building within or across teams (Saiti, 2014)

Several studies have held that a leader's communication and skill competence can be correlated to the amount of conflict within a school organization (Üstüner & Kiş, 2014) and how that conflict is managed (Uzun & Ayik, 2017). This last study found that principals who used the conflict management styles of avoidance (ignoring the conflict) or accommodating (placing more value on the other person's perspective than on your own) had more conflict within the school. You may find it surprising that an accommodating style of conflict management doesn't yield good results. In truth, it undermines perceptions of the skill competence of the leader, who is seen as self-sacrificing and weak. The result is that this approach undermines confidence in the leader and can build resentment. Therefore, it comes as little surprise that these researchers reported that current conflicts handled using an accommodating or avoiding style served as a catalyst for future problems.

Kaitlin Grant was a vice principal of a large high school, and as part of her job duties, she oversaw the mathematics and science departments at the school. All the department heads met for their monthly debriefing, the latest of which Ms. Grant was not able to attend due to a scheduling conflict. She learned that a conflict arose during the meeting when Hal Green, the mathematics chair, reportedly said, "The science team isn't pulling their weight. Look at our latest math scores [on the state assessment]. We can only do so much. Kids aren't getting the necessary application practice they need in science and it's holding them back." Lisbeth Ramirez, the science department chair, was waiting at the vice principal's office door the following morning: "I've had it with Hal and the way he undercuts the science department," she told Ms. Grant. "I've tried to talk with him privately about his behavior in our chairs meetings, and I'm not getting anywhere. You need to do something to make him stop. If you don't, I will be stepping down as chair and applying for a transfer to another school."

Ms. Grant knew that she needed to intervene, but she also needed to learn more about the backstory. A challenge for leaders is that they often must respond quickly to situations that are ill-defined (Robinson et al., 2021). Knowing that a "he said/she said" fact-finding mission would yield little useful information for managing this conflict, Ms. Grant used an approach that she learned about in a conflict management course offered by her state administrators association, defined by Robinson and colleagues (2021). She spoke separately to Ms. Ramirez and Mr. Green to learn more and made notes to herself to prepare (see Figure 2.2).

FIGURE 2.2 MS. GRANT'S NOTES

STAGE OF PROBLEM SOLVING	MS. RAMIREZ'S BELIEFS	MR. GREEN'S BELIEFS
Problem description beliefs	Mr. Green publicly criticized her team.	Math scores have declined for the last two years.

STAGE OF PROBLEM SOLVING	MS. RAMIREZ'S BELIEFS	MR. GREEN'S BELIEFS
Problem description beliefs (continued)	Public criticism is harmful.	Discussions about interdisciplinary approaches for science and math have gone nowhere.
	We have a strong science program, and using an interdisciplinary approach might dilute it.	Ms. Ramirez is blocking innovation.
Problem explanation beliefs	Mr. Green wants to be the boss of everything.	Ms. Ramirez doesn't like change.
	I haven't been effective in sharing my concerns with Mr. Green.	I have not been effective in explaining the benefits of an interdisciplinary plan.
Problem solution beliefs	Mr. Green should talk to me about his concerns before the meeting.	Ms. Ramirez should give this a try. Nothing else has worked to change the math scores.
	Mr. Green should be looking more closely at what effective math instruction looks like and start from there.	

Using the notes she had gathered from individual conversations with each of them, the vice principal felt equipped to broker a solution. She believed, on review, that Mr. Green and Ms. Ramirez were locked in a competing orientation. Her goal was to move them to a collaborating orientation. She shared with them the concerns each had raised, using a version of the notes she had gathered to print for them so she could refer to each other's beliefs when the discussion veered off track. They mutually agreed that Mr. Green and Ms. Ramirez would jointly propose an interdisciplinary pilot for the next school year and identify two teachers who wanted to explore this option. They also agreed they would monitor progress through the development of some common formative assessment items. Most importantly, Mr. Green conceded that public criticism was harmful, while Ms. Ramirez agreed that her stonewalling had contributed to Mr. Green's frustration.

► What benefits do you see in Ms. Grant's problem-solving approach? Are there barriers that make this more difficult to enact?

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT CONVEY AND DERAIL COMPETENCE

Perceptions of competence, as with every dimension of leader credibility, are in the eye of the beholder. While we don't get to decide that we are competent, we can be mindful of the everyday actions we do (and don't do) that can either convey or derail our communication and skill competence. Take a look at Figure 2.3. What do you do frequently and infrequently?

FIGURE 2.3 CONVEYING AND DERAILING OUR COMPETENCE

FACET OF COMPETENCE	ACTIONS THAT CONVEY COMPETENCE	ACTIONS THAT DERAIL COMPETENCE
Communication	• When directing staff, sharing your decision-making process and rationale • Acknowledging the work and accomplishments of others • Linking progress and problems to the values of the organization; these are opportunities for climate building • Using every opportunity to interact regularly with staff; this keeps little problems from getting bigger • Communicating primarily through talk	• Giving directions and expecting people to hop to it; that's why you're the boss • Overlooking the efforts of others • Stating directives using self-deflecting language (e.g., "Central office said we have to do this") • Spending the majority of your time in your office; those emails need to get answered! • Communicating primarily through email

FACET OF COMPETENCE	ACTIONS THAT CONVEY COMPETENCE	ACTIONS THAT DERAIL COMPETENCE
Skill	• When you don't know something, saying, "Let's find out together" or "I'll learn more about that and follow up with you" • When conflict arises, learning about the perspectives and beliefs of each party to better equip yourself for facilitation • When you are a direct party to the conflict, working through what you believe the other person would say about the description, explanation, and possible solution to a problem • Paying attention to the work conditions of the staff to proactively address challenges	• When you don't know something, saying, "That's not my area. Ask _____." • At the first whiff of conflict, avoiding it altogether and hoping someone else manages it • At the first whiff of conflict, exercising your authority to squelch it • At the first whiff of conflict, doing whatever you can to placate people so the issue will go away • Viewing work conditions as "fine"; the staff is lucky to have jobs

PAUSE AND PONDER

► Reflect on an example of a highly competent leader from your own career. How did that person display their communication competence? Their skill competence?

COMPETENCE AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE INTERNAL APPOINTMENT

Many leaders move into a position through internal appointment within the same school, from teacher to department chair or instructional coach; from dean to assistant principal;

or from assistant principal to principal. Unlike leaders who move from one school to another, these leaders face unique obstacles regarding their perceived competence in their new roles. Dominant among these challenges is that the role change resulted in tension, especially negative behaviors and attitudes, from colleagues, much of it related to questioning the leader's qualifications for the new position, something those transferring from other schools do not face to the same degree. Some of these perceptions are internalized, and a challenge for those who have been internally promoted to a new leadership role is that "some start doubting their competence, their old anxieties resurface, and they even freeze" (Jaca, 2021, p. 246).

If you are a current leader, be on the lookout for internally promoted candidates and know that they will benefit greatly from your guidance and support as they step into their new roles. Principal supervisors should be especially alert to these circumstances, as internally promoted principals do not have a mentor to turn to on the site. Assistant principal Rachelle Kamaka met regularly with the department chairs at the middle school where she worked and was especially sensitive to this issue for new chairs. Tim Hayashi was the new chair of the social studies department, having been a faculty member at the school for seven years. However, he only taught sixth grade during that time. He was getting pushback from his former colleagues, especially those who taught Grades 7 and 8, because he hadn't taught those grade levels in the past.

Ms. Kamaka had witnessed some of the difficulties the new department chair encountered. Although providing feedback about instruction and curriculum was in his job description, some teachers were resistant. Knowing this to be the case, Ms. Kamaka offered to go on learning walks with Mr. Hayashi to sharpen his eye (Fisher, Frey, Almarode, Flories, & Nagel, 2019). Although she didn't state it directly, the assistant principal was aware that it was an opportunity to share her competence publicly so that the other teachers in the department would witness the positive regard she had for his skills.

PAUSE AND PONDER

► What do you think of Ms. Kamaka's approach? Do you have additional suggestions for how to support an internally promoted staff member facing questions about his competence?

PRACTICES TO STRENGTHEN COMPETENCE

Your competence as a leader of teams, schools, or units is more than the sum of your previous experiences. Too often, quite frankly, people are placed into leadership roles by virtue of their credentials and licensure. But the evidence on leader competence goes beyond those details. It is massively linked to one's communication competence, just as verbal and written communication should be more than a list of directives. It must include language that is motivating, especially to continue to build trust and link to the organization's values. The skill competence is also important, but it doesn't start with "When I was a fourth-grade teacher, I . . .". Quite frankly, that wears thin pretty quickly. The skills you possess go beyond content knowledge and are evidenced in the ways you negotiate, manage conflict, and give and receive feedback. Consider making these actions a part of your professional plan for developing and deepening your leadership skills.

Learn more about the language of leadership by noting its use by those you admire. Effective leaders have their own style, but underneath is a common thread of leader speech types: giving direction, engaging in empathetic language, and meaning for others. Take note of these talk moves used by leaders you look up to, as their style can provide insight into how they accomplish things. It can also free you from the self-defeating internal dialogue that goes something like "If only I was more like ____."

Bring conflict management training to your team. It's not just for those in highly litigious positions, like the special

education director. As leaders, we manage conflict all the time. Teacher-leaders often talk about the fact (rightly so) that they didn't get any training to be a team leader. Your local or state organization may be a great source for this kind of professional development.

Sharpen your feedback skills. Feedback received (not given) advances learning. We also know that feedback is mediated by the relationship that the two people have. When preparing for providing feedback to a staff member, consider the relationship you have with that person. In addition, model the practice of seeking feedback by regularly checking in with others you work with to solicit feedback from them.

CONCLUSION

Educators rely on leaders to build and maintain conditions for them to perform at their highest level. A leader who is perceived as lacking competence creates fear and hesitancy in others who may be unsure whether that person is going to lead them off a cliff. Competence is conveyed through the talk moves we use every day. Keep in mind the statistic we shared with you at the beginning of this chapter: 70% of a principal's day is spent talking. So the real question is, how can you elevate that talk to build competence and trust? And what are the actions that need to occur in order to align the talk with the walk?