

CHAPTER 1

Principal Voice

Are You Being Heard?

Grandma Q on Leadership

Before you can be something special, you need to be something.

I grew up in a large Italian family, where having a voice was crucial, a necessity, a way to survive. No one held back their opinions. Good or bad, you knew exactly what people thought. The cacophony of voices at my grandparent's dinner table on Sundays taught me to appreciate the importance of having a voice. You had to speak up. If you didn't, you would be ignored like tofu at an Italian feast! I must admit, I was a little bit outside the norm—I listened more than I spoke. (I am still not sure if that was because I knew at the time that a lot can be learned from listening, or if I was simply afraid I wouldn't win that vocal competition!) The advice I received from grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and anyone else whose name ended in a vowel, was endless, in a great way. I have held on to countless kernels of advice that helped shaped

who I am today. Most often, I listened to the wisdom and words of my grandmother. As I reflect upon my career of fostering voice in schools, I realize that my passion to ensure *everyone* in school has a voice really began with the influence of Grandma Q. You will hear from Grandma Q throughout this book . . . her candid insights—her genuine, heartfelt voice.

My entire educational career—as a teacher, school administrator, professor, school board member, and researcher—has been dedicated to understanding and promoting voice in schools. It started with student voice. I will always be an advocate for students, not only because students deserve to be heard and to achieve their aspirations, but because I believe all students have something to teach me—indeed, to teach all of us. When I first started advocating for student voice, many educators thought it was an interesting concept, but a low priority. Now all of a sudden (if 30 years is sudden), the time has arrived. Educational leaders and policy makers are starting to pay attention to student voice. It is a high priority, one that is incorporated into school and district goals. Rightfully so. Our research has shown that when young people have a voice in school, they are seven times more likely to be academically motivated (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). From small rural areas, to large city districts, across the nation and around the world, schools are treating student voice with the importance it deserves.

Not only is this fantastic in its own right (perhaps a bit overdue, but fantastic), but it has also led to expanded work with voice. It is abundantly clear that students are not the only ones whose voice should be heard and valued. Teachers need a voice, as well. Over the past few years, my work has delved more deeply into understanding the dynamics of teacher voice (Teacher Voice Report, 2010–2014). It is within the context of the teacher voice research that the importance of another largely unheard voice became evident—the voice of the principal!

Just as we can learn from students and teachers about how to best support each in achieving their aspirations, principals should be encouraged to share their voice and be listened to, learned from,

and supported in their efforts to lead. “What?” you say. “We hear from principals all the time!” From newsletters to staff meetings, from professional development days to open houses, the “voice” of the principal is present. Sure, principals are the keepers and distributors of a great deal of information about their schools. But are their voices—their honest ideas about what is working well and what is not—heard in a way that provides opportunities to maximize change? Are principals able to utilize their voice to genuinely influence policy and practices? How is your voice a factor in leading and supporting growth schoolwide?

I have never spoken to a principal who didn’t have to figure out how to lead in spite of the daily fires she must put out or she assumes she must put out. The challenge of where and how to spend one’s time is a leadership puzzle. It is a given that principals will never have enough time in a day to do everything asked of them, however, leading with voice increases principals’ efficiency and effectiveness. As you will learn, voice is an all-encompassing process and not just a leadership technique to employ during specific situations. Leading with voice does not take more time; rather, it provides the opportunity to reduce the fires that occur due to lack of understanding and communication. Voice provides an opportunity to better understand your school, colleagues, students, and community, thus allowing you to lead with the trust and support of those around you.

For example, currently 30% of a principal’s day is consumed with managing student discipline and fulfilling compliance requirements, and only 6% of his or her day is connected to instruction-related tasks (Hornig, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009). Yet, principals are told they are instructional leaders of their buildings. By incorporating and leading with voice, principals realize that instructional leadership is the role of everyone in the building and not just the formal leader. Thus, principals actually gain time and effectiveness when the role of instructional leader and student management involves all stakeholders.

“I am the principal and could not be prouder. I only wish I could say and do what I believe is best for my staff and students.” Does

My experience has shown that principal voice is being used to direct, rather than lead through collaboration.

that statement surprise you? I doubt it, as I hear it all too often. One of the biggest assumptions made in education is

that principals have a meaningful voice in their schools. It is true that the opportunity for your voice to be heard exists. However, through my research on student and teacher voice, I have come to learn that the voice of principals is not nearly as influential as it can and should be. Many principals have expressed frustration that their voice is not listened to or valued. Too often, “voice” for a principal, while inherent in their role as an authority figure, is directly connected to dictating what needs to be done. Principals have positional power and the responsibility for hiring, firing, scheduling, evaluations, and budgets. But how much of that is control, rather than meaningful influence? My experience has shown that principal voice is being used to direct, rather than lead through collaboration.

I have met far too many principals who seem to have a fair amount of control, but little influence. They tell me they feel “beat up by the system.” They tell me they are not “listened to” and have very little opportunity to express their true ideas to improve their school. One principal told me, “I feel like I am talking to myself half the time.” I often wonder whose vision principals are following—theirs or someone else’s? Despite the “power” inherent in their positions, not many principals have the ability to express their voice in meaningful ways. It is completely understandable that so many principals are frustrated in their schools.

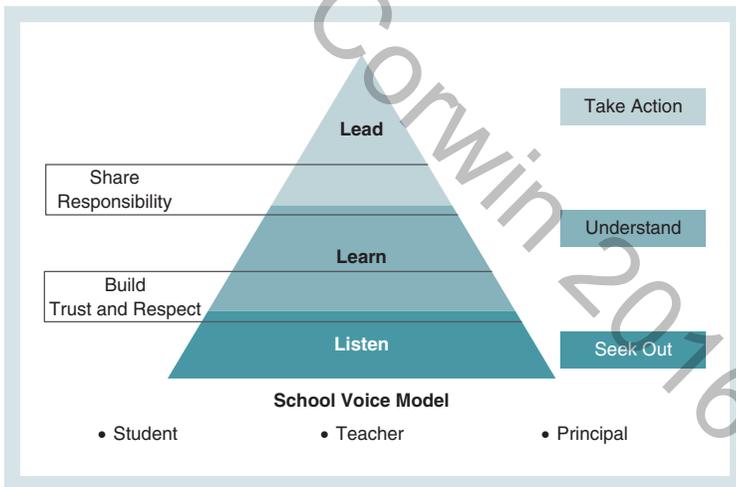
The insights and ideas in this book are designed to reduce frustration and renew excitement. Principal voice is a tool that helps ensure your voice is being heard, understood, appreciated, and effective. In this book, you will learn to develop your own voice in a way that can influence change. I believe you must first listen and learn in order to use your voice to lead your school effectively.

Grandma Q on Listening

To not listen means you think you are too smart to learn more. No one is that smart!

The past 30 years have encompassed a great deal of learning. We have continually strived to employ best practices around voice and aspirations, and we have been refining our work every step of the way. The biggest revelations have come in regard to voice, expanding from student voice to teacher voice to principal voice. Ultimately, the progression of this work has led to a model of voice that illustrates the dynamic nature of voice in a way that is applicable to all (see Diagram 1).

DIAGRAM 1 School Voice Model: Listen, Learn, Lead



The Voice Model represents a process that allows you to develop your voice in a manner in which it is heard, respected, and recognized as advocating for meaningful change in your school. As the diagram suggests, even when leading, you must continue to listen and learn.

Source: Quaglia Institute for School Voice & Aspirations @DrRussQ

LISTEN

Listening is not a passive act; it is more than hearing someone. Listening requires planning, openness, and a genuine interest in understanding the thoughts and ideas of those around you. Your voice should facilitate the voices of others in and outside of school, thus allowing you to better understand the people you lead. And you must use more than just your ears; you must also listen with your eyes. What do you observe around you? Take note of when students are engaged or disengaged from learning. If you notice that a teacher is happy, upset, or frustrated, ask why and what you can do to better support him or her. Observe which opportunities elicit the most enthusiasm from parents. How can you capitalize on that and show parents you value their support and ideas? When you read about local companies that give back to the community, reach out to them for opportunities to collaborate. As a principal, you need to take the initiative to let everyone in your learning community know you *want* to listen to and learn from them.

----- In Their Own Voice . . .

Mathew Read

**Principal, Oriel Academy
(An Aspirations Academy Trust School)**

London, England

The principal is a role model, someone who people look to for the best example and who supports and challenges others to be the best. However, this job is infinitely complex; there are a myriad times when we are not the paradigm our team needs, so we have to listen to and channel the voices of those that are. These voices may be part of our institutions, so we give them our voice, acknowledging and empowering them, or we may draw on external sources listening to them and channeling their voice in an authentic and honest way.

LEARN

As a leader, listening needs to be more than a polite gesture. The true value of listening is in learning from what you hear. Underpinning the successful development of your principal voice is the fundamental belief that people around you have something to teach you. Regardless of age or years of experience, the people you work with embody expertise that you can learn from. You may learn from a veteran teacher a unique way to engage the community. You may learn from your support staff about a different perspective on the role of parents, as they, too, may be parents, aunts, uncles, or mentors. You may learn from students great ideas to make the learning environment more engaging. One of the best ways to learn is to use your voice to raise questions that lead to deeper conversations. During the listening and learning stages, relationships are strengthened and greater trust is established.

----- In Their Own Voice . . .

Diane Burbank

Principal, Woodside High School

Woodside, California

I am principal: “Hear me roar!” No, that’s not how I use my principal’s voice at all! While I’ll admit to an occasional “Knock it off!” across the quad to get a student to stop cutting the line or to get off the shoulders of another student, my real principal’s voice comes out in meetings when I’m asking, “Why do you think that?” or “How will that affect kids?” or “Tell me more.” In order to support initiatives on campus, it’s important that I’ve asked the questions to understand all the implications and the impact to my school community.

LEAD

Listening and learning effectively builds a solid foundation for you to lead, to use your voice with purpose in a way that creates meaningful change at your school. Using this process, you will be able to advocate for change based on the unique perspectives and experiences of your school community. If you effectively listen and learn from teachers, students, parents, and the community, your purpose and actions will be backed by the cumulative knowledge and experiences of these people. Your voice then becomes an effective tool to promote a collaborative process by which you lead.

A principal with “Voice” is characterized as having the ability to speak openly and honestly in an environment that is driven by trust and responsibility. Using your voice is not only about sharing your own thoughts, but also utilizing your voice to elicit and support the voice of others in the organization. Principal voice is about taking action, *listening* to the people around you, *learning* from what is being said, and *leading* with the best interests of all concerned in mind. Without the strength of your voice, it is virtually impossible for you and your school to reach the fullest potential.

----- In Their Own Voice . . .

Susan Koulianos

Principal, Harding Elementary School

Youngstown, Ohio

Giving up control while having my staff and students as partners in the decision-making process has been extremely beneficial and in fact, easy! I speak honestly and openly with staff and students. I beg them to take risks and more importantly, my actions demonstrate that their voice is important to me and that we are a TEAM! Truthfully, our team works so well together and we don't treat “student, teacher, or principal voice” as something special, but as a way of life. I truly believe that the thoughts and ideas around Principal Voice are common sense beliefs that benefit everyone.

This book addresses how you can employ the Voice Model to foster *your* voice in a way that builds relationships, trust, and momentum while involving students, teachers, parents, and community members. In addition to hearing from my Grandma, you will hear stories about some of the finest principals I have ever worked with and learned from. Each chapter provides strategies you can implement immediately to develop your own voice as a principal, strengthen your voice as a leader, and utilize your voice to make positive changes in your school community. You will be asked to reflect on your own voice in each chapter . . . and there is no time like the present!

● ● ● REFLECTIONS

- Am I comfortable listening to every stakeholder's voice, particularly those who have different beliefs and values? If not, whose ideas do I tend to dismiss too easily?
 - Do I really believe everyone in our educational community has something to teach me? Why or why not?
 - How do I use my voice in a way that is more about providing leadership and vision than dictating rules and disseminating information?
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