

How to Respond to a Complaint, Once, Forever...

Yesterday (12/17/14) our blog was titled “How to Gracefully Accept and Pre-Answer a Complaint.” It and today’s follow-up blog are based on Jim Burgett’s [The School Principal’s Toolbook](#). (The same process was shared in Jim’s recent [The Art of School Boarding](#) where the same “what do I do with this complaint?” dilemma faces School Board members.)

In yesterday’s blog Burgett suggested the complaint recipient follow an acronym CALM. Key to the first response was the need to go to the appropriate level of the chain of command. That is where this blog’s acronym, PASS, picks up the procedure.

Principals usually have **two choices** when they are given a complaint. **They answer it** because it is appropriate to do so, or **they gently hand it back** (throwing the complaint) with a sense of direction and assistance rather than compassion and understanding. If the complaint belongs somewhere else then that is where it must go, with some redirection from you.

If you need to “throw” the complaint, there are also four steps and a helpful word to remember: **PASS**. Pass infers to pass it off, and that is what you will do in many situations.

PASS means: P-Point; A-Avoid; S-Share; S-Summarize

Point: To “point” means to defer or refer. This is the tricky part. It is where you explain the chain of command to those who pretend not to know there is one. (Who doesn’t know about the relationship between the boss and an employee? It’s similar to the directions given on an airplane—does anyone really need to be told how to fasten their seat belt?) You point the person to where they should go with the question or

complaint. Yes, this is where they should have gone first and where they need to go now. Even if they tell you they don't want to go there, won't go there, or want to talk directly to the "head honcho," you gently indicate that policy requires that the person closest to the situation should be contacted first. Only if the problem can't be resolved do you climb the chain. You also point out that in most cases problems are resolved quickly when the chain of command is followed. If they refuse to follow your guidance, pause for a moment. We will cover that later.

Avoid: Avoiding is very important. Avoid any promise of action. Avoid any assurance that you understand the issue. (In almost all cases, you can't understand when you only hear half of the problem.) And avoid a repeat of this situation by making it clear that the chain is the proper approach. Again, if they adamantly refuse to follow the chain, hold on for a moment.

Share: "Share" means to briefly share your role, your position in the chain of command, and your reliance on the system to function as designed. I would always tell them that if they go through the chain and are still not satisfied then you will certainly be glad to talk to them about ways to handle their concern. In some cases you will send them to the assistant superintendent, or even the superintendent. When you go above your level, you always offer to help them make the contact. You become very helpful, but you do not solve the problems when they aren't yours to solve. If you send them "down" the chain, and they refuse to go there, you offer to facilitate a meeting with all parties.

Summarize: The final S is for "summarize." I like this part. If done well, it ends the conversation on a win-win. If you have thrown the complaint to someone in the chain of command, and explained the why appropriately, you have done your job well. If you need to discuss the complaint with the person, and you do it calmly and respectfully and with the intention

of finding the facts before you offer potential solutions, you will have done your job well.

You aren't quite done, though, when you have finished PASS. You need to email or call those involved. If you suggested the complainer contact a teacher, the superintendent, or another administrator, you need to report this conversation, even if you think it was resolved or was too minor to be reported.

Your upward chain of command is probably to the superintendent (or principal if you are on the building team) so if you feel they need to be aware of the situation, be sure to email them an FYI as well.

Remember, when dealing with criticism, have a plan. Remain CALM, know the PASS technique, when or where to use it, and always be fair and respectful. Golda Meir may have said it best, "You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist."

This 8-point structure explained in the two blogs guides the outsider with questions or difficulties to their resolution. It is professional, positive, and it keeps the complainant and the system's respondents "in the know" as the difficulties are met.

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett