

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

[How to gracefully accept and](#)

pre-answer a complaint

Whether you're a school principal, publisher, engineer, or whatever, have you ever been swept off your feet by some windbag (sometimes well-meaning) bellowing one or many **complaints** at you? And then had to think up some positive (and intelligent) **response**, right on the spot, to at least level the one-person-shouting field so their problem could be sensibly resolved (or at least addressed)?

I found a much-needed pocket solution for almost any such assault when I edited Jim Burgett's first-rate book, [The School Principal's Toolbook](#). (We published the book last month: Jim's [sixth](#).) And yes, we are kin: Jim is my famous brother—and he is tactfully very smart! (Until I was saved by this approach, my system had been to move right into their face and talk twice as loud.)

Here's his method for accepting complaints.

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Accepting Complaints

I define "complaint" to include a wayward comment, a concern, a jab, a flat-out inflammatory outburst, or anything in between. It may come at a meeting, at the Dollar Store, at church. It may happen any time or any place. Seldom do you have prep time so you need to be prepared 24/7.

Because School Board members also attract complaints at the odd moments, in my book [The Art of School Boarding: What Every School Board Member Needs to Know](#) I outline how those members should accept (receive) a complaint, then how to respond to it (throw it back) [Read my blog tomorrow (12/18/14) about how to respond]. [The process is] equally applicable to principals and other leaders so let me share [it] here through an acronym that should help you remember the steps used to catch

(receive) the complaint.

The acronym is **CALM: C-Compliment; A-Ask; L-Listen; M-Mimic**

Compliment: The first step is to compliment the complainer! No matter how irritated they may be, or you may get, remember to compliment them. "Thanks for your interest in the school." "I appreciate your concern." "You have been a long-time supporter of the district, and that is appreciated." Get your compliment in to set the stage for what follows, always thinking of the word CALM. It will help you stay calm as you go through the steps. The compliment at the beginning may be the easiest step, and it is a way to focus your attitude, and theirs, in a positive direction. It may be very hard to do. You may only be able to say something like, "I understand it may be hard to share your concerns, but I am grateful that you are speaking directly to me."

Ask: As they discuss their concern, you will probably need to stop them and ask some questions. Your first question may involve the chain-of-command issue. With the building leader this is often the first question as well. Let's say the citizen is complaining about a discipline issue that they think was unjust. Let's assume the disciplinary action was administered by a teacher, like having the child miss a recess for not turning in an assignment. After complimenting them, I would briefly listen to the initial complaint, then stop them and ask, "What did Nick's teacher say to you when you asked her about this issue?"

Do you see the direction I am suggesting? I am assuming the parent knows the proper chain of command and assuming she went there first. This is a much better approach than a back-sided reprimand such as, "You did talk to Nick's teacher about this, didn't you?" My first statement is factual and should not provoke controversy. My second statement is a put-down, with the assumption she didn't follow the chain of command. If the parent comes back with a sharp statement like, "No way am I

going to talk to that teacher, we had her before when Sarah was in her class, and she was a pain then!"

Then you ask a follow-up chain-of-command question: "Okay, if you didn't talk to the teacher, then what did the assistant principal (or athletic director) say when you shared this concern with him/her?" Again, you are not offering judgment, just asking, what did you do about this issue before coming to me? Obviously, if you are the next person in the chain of command, this question is inappropriate.

Listen: Even if you want to defend the school, the teacher, the administration, or the nature of the beast in general, don't. Just listen with all the listening skills you can muster. Eye contact, no nodding because that might be construed as agreement, just maybe a comment if you need clarification. "Who is the person you just mentioned?" "When did you say this happened?" Questions should be asked only if you need more information when you indeed share this conversation, which you will, in most cases, even though the complainer will not expect that to happen.

Mimic: The last step in CALM is to mimic, or paraphrase. This is the final step before you begin to handle, or "throw," the complaint. Paraphrase means to summarize the comments if they need it, and in most cases, even if they don't. Here is an example: "Mary, let me see if I understand your concern clearly. Nick missed an assignment. You think it was his second or third missed assignment this term and Mrs. Hawken had Nick stay in during recess two days in a row to catch up with his missed assignment. You feel this is not an appropriate punishment. Do I understand your concern?" Expect the respondent to modify your summary, but keep to your plan. Stay CALM, don't encourage or engage in further discussion, don't agree, and unless you feel it is appropriate, don't even say you understand her concern or frustration.

If you have successfully "caught" the complaint, here is what

you have done: You (1) started the conversation on a positive note by sharing a compliment, (2) suggested that the chain of command needed to be followed, (3) patiently, without interruption, listened to the story, and (4) summarized what you heard with a short and concise paraphrase, with no agreement or editorial comment on your part. You have presented yourself professionally, positively, and with an attitude of concern. You also set up the next step by bringing the chain of command into the conversation. If you followed steps 1-4, calmly, you should be proud of yourself. It's not always easy to do, and in many cases, it takes practice.

Tomorrow (12/18/14), let me share Jim Burgett's **four-step process of responding to a complaint**. Both the means of acceptance and response work, sometimes with appropriate modifications to meet your topic or position. The best thing is that if you can remember them, you're loaded and ready for the verbal mugging!

Best wishes,

Gordon Burgett
