



Cultivating Healthy Adult Communication

By Jennifer Abrams

Leaders who wish to build strong, professional learning cultures and healthy, thriving school communities need to be aware of and compassionate towards a key understanding on which few leaders focus: Educators have credentials in how to teach subjects and grade levels, but what they don't have are credentials in how to talk to and with other adults.

Yet, for a strong and healthy school culture, leaders need to put energy and time into developing the skills and capacities for everyone to engage in healthy adult-to-adult communication.

Schools that don't just survive, but thrive, are schools that expect, encourage and support everyone's growth around skills for healthy adult-to-adult communication. The work of being a place of lifelong learning, continuous growth and successful innovation, must encourage both inner and outer development of those that work within them.

Psychologically safe schools where educators can develop capacities and mindsets to become more psychologically mature and cognitively capable are schools that create a positive ripple effect that reaches far into the future. With this type of inner and outer development around successful communication, those working within a school will become more capable of adapting successfully to change, have broader perspectives that allow them to be more objective and less 'swept by' new initiatives, and be better able to manage complexity with more sturdiness and an increased sense of well-being.

We need to develop school cultures that, like healthy trees, have solid, connected, nourished roots. They can sway flexibly in the wind by not breaking or toppling when strong winds come up.

To this end, leaders emphasizing the sustainability skill of successful adult-to-adult communication need to focus on:

- **Process and results.** They know how we do our work is important, not just what we do.
- **Effectiveness and efficiency.** They know educators working with each other in ways which support a healthy school culture makes the school more effective. And this is as important, if not more so, than getting work done in quick and expedient ways.
- **Being both technical and adaptive.** They know while the management of technical tasks is important, so is the robust work they do around leading in complex times.

The development of a sustainable and healthy culture requires that we have a more deliberate and intentional focus on adult-to-adult communication in both intrapersonal and interpersonal ways. While we might consider those over the age of 18 are not a main focus of our learning in schools, it is essential that all those in a school are stretching at their learning edges.

When professional learning happens it often comes in the form of work around instructional strategies, assessment practices or curricular shifts – all necessary ways to professionally develop. And inner and outer development around adult-to-adult communication is also essential to a thriving school. Adults can grow psychologically, cognitively, emotionally and spiritually, even when they're done growing physically. Neuroplasticity is possible for everyone.

When one is aware of the world's challenges at this time – climate crisis, human rights violations, wars on multiple fronts – we know human development is not an indulgence. Students are watching us to see how we respond. It is critical that leaders focused on sustainability work on developing themselves and those at their schools to be better educators and bigger human beings. Our communication with one another is being observed. Students are learning how to be people by watching us.

Expecting, emphasizing and supporting those working in schools to develop skills to collaborate respectfully, willingly innovate in teams and navigate cognitive conflict requires a focus on these types of skills, capacities and mindsets. In my work, *Stretching Your Learning Edges: Growing (Up) at Work* (Abrams, 2021) there is a focus on five ways to grow.

Knowing Our Identities

How can we know ourselves deeply as an individual, a colleague and a teammate? What should we know about ourselves as we work with others? By acknowledging and knowing our history, upbringing, strengths, biases, limitations, motivations and values, we can become better and more aware colleagues and teammates.

Suspending Certainty

How do we stretch beyond ourselves and build our intellectual humility and perspective taking? Being able to suspend certainty that we are “right” enables us to see outside ourselves and reflect on and critique our own decisions and value systems. These qualities are essential to work effectively as a team member and a more inclusive, equity-minded colleague.

Taking Responsibility

How can we take responsibility for our own work product, our language, our actions and our development? We need to consider how to face challenges directly and humanely with an intent to work out solutions, as well as apologize effectively when we have been incorrect or hurtful.

Building Resiliency

The work we do is challenging and demands resiliency. What emotional and psychological hygiene must we practice to be healthy for ourselves and for others? How do we sustain commitment, energy and health for ourselves and our work? Learning how to build the bandwidth to feel more comfortable with life's ambiguities and disappointments helps a school culture be healthier and more productive and our communications more humane.

Engaging in Reciprocity

It is our responsibility to work together and communicate respectfully as we recognize we cannot accomplish major feats in siloes. We need to work with an increased expertise in how to collaborate effectively.

The world challenges all of us working in schools – socially, politically and environmentally – and leaders who focus on sustainability in their work know this at deep levels. The need for self-awareness in all our interactions and especially in our schools is paramount. This work can feel like at least one, if not two, sizes too big for us. And yet it is essential we move forward just the same and grow into the work instead of being paralyzed by the task. Leading with a focus on healthy adult-to-adult communication is a place to start. Onward. [CP](#)

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