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Talking Tech with Leaders Getting Buy-In and Understanding

by Stephen Abram

How well are you faring with getting your technology agenda endorsed and funded by your management team or board? Is everything going swimmingly? No one is trying to block useful applications like YouTube or blogging? Your filters aren't obstructing useful teaching technologies? Is there a conversation gulf between your IT group, your board teachers, and library folk? Or not? From my conversations with many K-12 folks, I hazard a guess that this is the management challenge of our times.

How is technology having an impact in the whole school? How are your technology strategies, frameworks and infrastructures having a *positive* impact on how learners succeed? Are they empowered to do their homework successfully? What's your environment like? Can you say with confidence that technology seamlessly bridges the school to home gap and enhances the education and learning strategies in your school?

This is an important part of our strategy. I thought I'd devote this month's column to tactics and strategies for talking about tech with management – those key stakeholders – like principals, boards, trustees, administrators and even parents.

Some Key Principles for Talking to Management:

1. Management has very little so called 'spare' time – just like you.
2. Management cannot easily make time to read a long report, absorb the key points, and make the connections to overall priorities and strategies.
3. Management often has different communication and learning styles than those that are found in teachers, librarians and systems folk.

Some Key Tactics

1. Use the powerful vocabulary. Action verbs are more powerful than other verbs. Avoid jargon – especially product names, systems and library jargon.
2. Couch the messages in terms that they care about. WIIFT – What's in it for them?
3. Don't be defensive. You're not defending the school library or technology. You're building support for a vision and trying to influence priorities.

4. Don't focus on money and budget increases or cuts. Focus on priorities that connect to the institutional mandates, objects, mission and vision. Money follows priority strategies.
5. Focus on measurements not statistics. Impact not effort. Focus on outcomes not process. Money and strategy follow a successful vision that engages.

Getting the research you need

There are some key things that are worth doing and some that should maybe be avoided in tough economic situations. For example the megaproject research study might be appropriate for academic support but my overreach in a school or board setting. Partnering might help reduce costs. Smaller studies might give you just the measurement or soundbite you need to influence management. Try these methodologies on a smaller scale:

- Sampling
- Literature search (Why reinvent the wheel?)
- Analysis of student footnotes and bibliographies
- Case Studies
- Small Focus Groups
- Critical Incident Research
- Keystroke tracking
- Web analytics

I particularly like critical incident research as a simpler way of taking the pulse in a dynamically changing environment. You ask folks (teachers, students, etc.) to think back to the last time they needed something important. Then you evaluate if they were successful in solving that need and made the best choices. I call this "when it matters research." Can you collect stories using this method to show the need for an increased focus on web research, print balance and all the various emerging literacies made more critical by the evolving web?

Either way, it's good to get your act in order. Spread the wealth and collect your war room as a team. Share a delicious or Zotero research link group. Add everything to a Ning community. Empower yourselves to find and know enough and have it at your fingertips for follow through.

Magic Seven Strategies for Talking to Management

1. The Conference

When you act is together hold a joint conference. You can run this under the auspices of your professional association. Invite all stakeholders. Invite key speakers you've identified in your research phase. Invite stakeholder to speak as well. Hold facilitated discussions. It's more subtle than it looks and the social

aspect of a conference allows for informal as well as formal conversations. Mountains can move in a well designed summit on technology issues and the curriculum.

2. The Meeting

Too often the meetings about these issues either involve the powerful and the governed, or do not involve as many key stakeholders as are needed to deal appropriately with a key issue. For example I have seen situations where the systems department controls everything about the filtering strategy with little concern or knowledge about the impact on libraries and the classroom. Describe for me how this IT architecture support learning at our school. How about that policy? Once it gets out into the open and is clearly written down or presented you can deal with it outside of the power structure and focus on need.

Sometimes a small group of parents with possibly incomplete information or philosophies not aligned with the whole community encourage problematic rules. A meeting between the key stakeholders and facilitated discussions can come to terms with the real educational and learning priorities and balance the need for safety with preparing learners for a technological world.

3. The Joint Report

This one can be quite clever. Get a key stakeholder to agree to participate in the writing of a joint report on the major issues of using technology and learning. With everyone focused on creating a successful document to underpin strategies it moves difficult issues into the open instead of, for example, each filtering change being treated like a terrorist grenade. Such collaboratively built documents can create a clearer discussion document and inform decision making – as long as the task force is constituted well.

4. The Focus Group and Survey

Focus groups can be used in many ways. One way is to use them for collecting information that is more easily gained through conversation. They can also be used to collect information on the challenges faced by students and classroom teachers and to spend some time determining what is offered that might alleviate those stresses. The survey, especially when administered online and anonymously, can be a useful tool to collect information about politically sensitive or difficult topics. For example, it might be helpful to know what students and teachers have found to be helpful/bad about system filters. Are teachers feeling that some useful, needed or essential tools are not available to them? Can we find the level or mosaic of the digital divide / gap in students and teachers? Using both of these techniques empowers your team to speak more successfully with others.

5. The Research Summary

If your folks are making decisions based on inadequate information or philosophies driven by anything from bias to fear, then your literature search can create a wonderful resource. An annotated bibliography with an executive summary that lives on its own can be very powerful. Each point can turn into a simple slideshow that informs folks of the wonders of some learning technologies and inform people in administrative capacities of the real dimensions of the dangers and opportunities.

6. The Challenge

We need to collaborate to be successful. You are not an island. Can you work with others to put a team together to move things forward? Of course you can. I'd suggest that stealth committees are one way to start. You can start with single school pilots. You can start at the board level with a handpicked group. One underused strategy is to use your local or state/provincial education or library association to provide the outside framework for this activity. It's a valid role for them to play. Either way, it's better than the pain of fighting a lonely battle. Sometimes these technology issues that are causing friction feel like the weather – everyone talks about it but no one does anything about it. You can make a difference.

7. Telling Stories

There is a great book by Steven Denning called *The Springboard Story*. It expounds on the mantra that you can influence more successfully if you "Share don't tell!" By trying some of the techniques and strategies above over time you will have collected a number of powerful stories that can be crafted into little gems and shared with you cohort of teacher-librarians. By telling them consistently and well you can move mountains and change an organization over time. It is stories that underpin our society. It is stories that are found in our culture and in our libraries. If you take it on to use storytelling as a key method of gaining the funding and support you need to adopt technologies in the service of learning and your students, I promise that you will be more successful.

What does this have to do with your success?

Everything! It's definitely going to be difficult times over the next few years. Change and economic disruption will increase. We cannot afford not to use every tool at our disposal to be great educators. If we continue to not use these free tools, to block too many or fear them inappropriately, then we diminish our role and don't reach our true potential or inspire our learners to succeed in the world of their future. And that would be sad.

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