

Well Done

The familiar five Ws
for every message.

Alan E. Nelson

Ever look through a pair of smudged glasses or a dirty windshield? Sure you have. The view is similar to what muddy communication does to a team's effectiveness, reducing members' ability to see the vision and distracting them from their tasks.

There's no such thing as an effective leader who is a poor communicator. With all the excitement about cool new tools like Twitter, texting, Facebook, e-mail, Skype, and Web sites, we're tempted to let "how" preempt "what." While we work with the most tech-savvy students ever, the basics of effective communication content remain the same. A clear example of this involves coaching student leaders in the essentials of communicating meeting and event info. Whether you're simply announcing the next student council meeting or marketing a schoolwide activity, failing to handle the basics can spoil an otherwise wonderful gathering.

Effective leadership communication content addresses the **Five W's** of journalistic reporting: Who, What, When, Where, and Why.

Who: Who is the meeting or event designed to attract? Are the decision makers in the room? If you don't have "who" you need, more meetings will likely follow, requiring extra time and potentially frustrating team members.

What: Is there an agenda? Does everyone need to be there the entire time? What's the deadline for adding things to the agenda? Is it written? If not, why not? What do we want to accomplish? Is the item for information, discussion, a vote, or entertainment? Each of these is a different task with different expectations. If people tend to come late or leave early, schedule the most important items when a majority can participate.

When: Have we looked at the calendar for potential conflicts? The bigger the event, the more time we will need to promote it and avoid other activities. Is it feasible for those invited to attend? (See "who.") Have we left enough time to accomplish "what" is on the agenda?

Where: Is the meeting/event space reserved? Can people find it easily? Do they need special directions? Has everyone been there before, or could it be confusing to visitors?

Why: Most student leaders are busy. Assuming they'll be at a meeting may be presumptive. Most leaders overestimate how important their meetings or events are, meaning that you may need to establish the "why" for information and inspiration. The first item in any message should be a response to the question, "Why should I read/listen to this, and why should I attend?"

Here's a training exercise: Have pairs of students write an announcement of a real or made-up meeting or event. Then pass the written announcement to another pair to review and suggest improvements according to the

Five W's. ■

Half Baked

Seven Side Effects of Poor Communication:

- Confusion among team members ("Are we meeting today?")
- Lost time/resources ("Send a revision next week.")
- Poor decisions ("I didn't know we were to have the reports done.")
- Frustration (Distracts from the real agenda.)
- Lack of participation ("I got it late so I scheduled something else.")
- Poor results (Due to lack of participation or preparation.)
- Leader frustration ("Why didn't more people show up?")

—Alan E. Nelson

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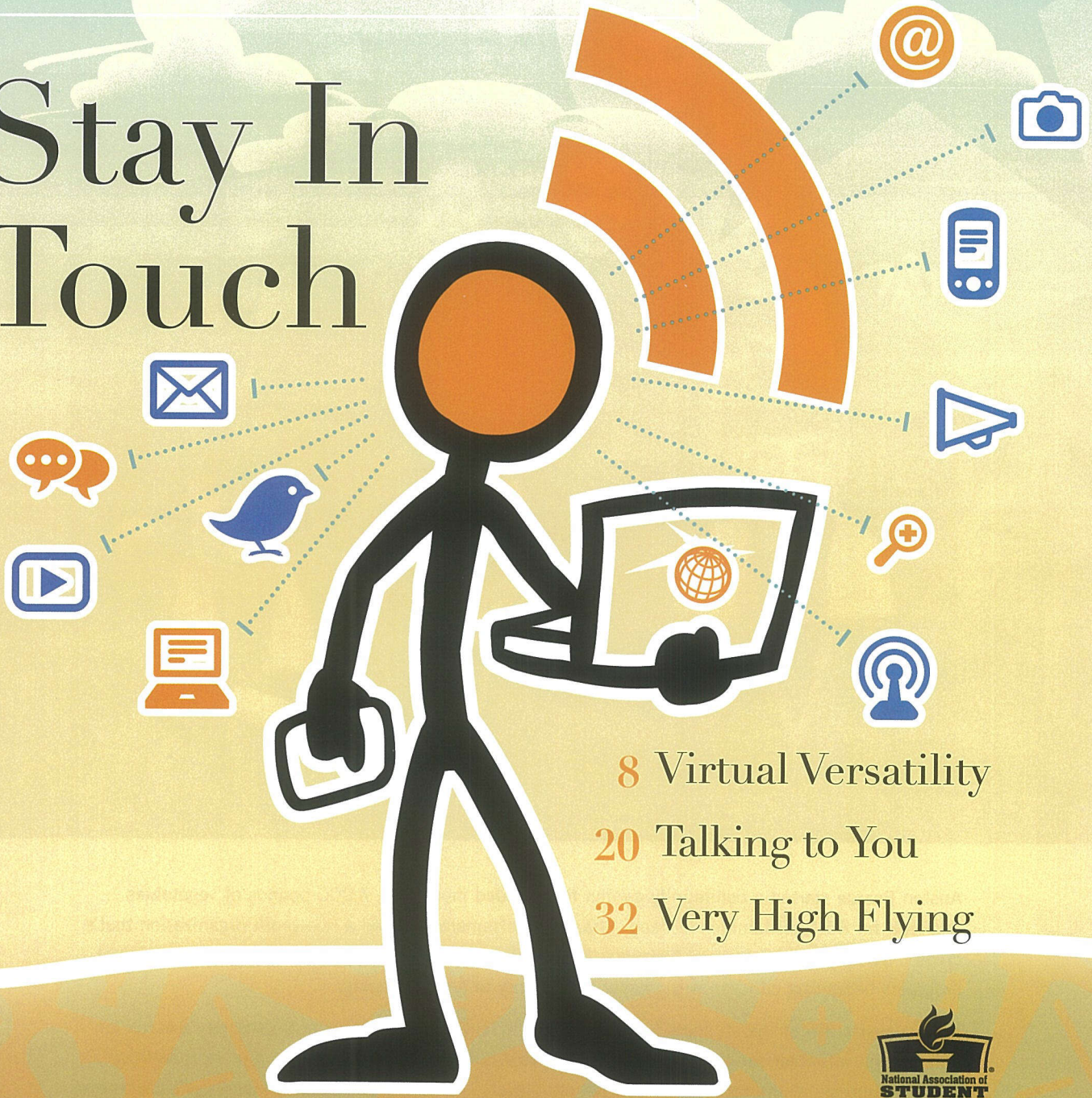
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leadership

FOR STUDENT ACTIVITIES



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