



## Improving Communication: Our Upcoming Retreat (July 1)

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About a month ago I discovered that several of our staff colleagues were experiencing unusually high levels of stress. One was taken to the emergency room with chest pains and kept overnight—a series of tests subsequently showed no physical problem with her heart. Another colleague experienced heart palpitations and has been wearing a heart monitor, and so far her doctors have not been able to pinpoint the problem. In talking with these two folks, along with a number of other staff members, it became clear that job-related stress was at least a contributing factor. There will be stressful times in any job, but many of our folks are experiencing significant and prolonged stress. Maggie Ford confirmed that a number of people in different positions at the School have been experiencing increased stress. I certainly don't think stress is limited to our professional staff, but they are bearing the brunt of it.

What does all of this have to do with the School having a retreat on July 1? One common theme emerged in talking with people—stress is increased by poor communication with one another around work expectations and our capacity to meet those expectations. I talked with Cindy Lee and Greg Allison and asked if they thought that finding a way to work on communication issues at the retreat would be consistent with the work of their strategic planning implementation committee.



They agreed that it fit nicely with their work on communication, and the full committee concurred.

The Collaborative Work Environment Committee will serve as the planning committee for the retreat, along with several additional members—Maggie Ford, Todd Nicolet, Ellen Bradley, Emily Hinkle, and me. I've also asked Maggie Chotas and Betsy Polk with Mulberry Tree Consulting to help us plan and facilitate the retreat. They know us well and they already have been helpful in thinking about the day. The money spent on this retreat will be a one-time expense and it will not have any impact on our later decisions about budget cuts. It is important to make this investment in ourselves, perhaps especially in these stressful economic times.

The day has not been planned, so I can't tell you exactly what we are going to do. One thing we need to do is acknowledge all of the good things going on at the School. There really are terrific things happening and we need to celebrate them.

The main focus will be on taking concrete steps to improve our communication. This is about taking action—we need to agree on effective principles of communication and begin building our skills. Consider the following example. A faculty member decides to create a new course without recognizing the ripple effect it will have on the work of many different staff members. Do staff members feel comfortable sharing information about their capacity and whether the timing of the new course is realistic? Or do they assume that a final decision has been made and they must add the course no matter how limited their time? Should the faculty member invite a conversation about capacity without waiting for a staff member to raise the issue? Faculty members face similar issues in communicating with their faculty colleagues, public officials, and even well-intentioned administrators who approach them with wonderful "opportunities." Greg and Cindy's committee will build on our progress at the retreat as they continue their work in the months ahead. The retreat is an important first step.

There is a particular challenge for us in working on communication issues related to work expectations and our capacity to meet them—we hire people who are committed to service and who want to do an excellent job. That is great and it is one reason we have such a wonderful reputation among North Carolina officials. Responsiveness must always be a distinguishing feature of the School. The question is whether we can communicate better with one another, and with public officials, to make sure we continue to be responsive in ways that are effective, sustainable, and less stressful.

I'm looking forward to the retreat and I hope you will be able to attend. We have not settled on a site yet, but we are working on it. I am confident that we can accomplish something concrete and meaningful, and have some fun at the same time. How cool is that?