

## Do You Hear What I Hear?

The Grandberry School District is a wealthy suburb of a large northeastern city. Most residents are upper middle class. Some of the residents are millionaires. Many of the community leaders can trace their ancestry back to the Mayflower. These rich residents are used to getting their way in the school district and in the city. Few minorities live in Grandberry. Those minorities that do live in Grandberry are chief executive officers with one of the many companies in the city.

Mr. Charles Masters is principal of Grandberry Middle School. He is a graduate of Harvard University. He was raised by an upper middle class family and feels very much at home in Grandberry. Masters' is Mr. Alan Smith, a young African American man. Smith attended Yale University on an athletic scholarship. He came from a very poor section of New York City and had a difficult time growing in the shadows of gangs. When he was hired, he told Mr. Masters that he could get along with anyone. Mr. Masters believes that Smith's appointment has worked out well during his first year.

At present Mr. Masters is preparing for the monthly Parent Advisory Council meeting. His secretary has brought him copies of the agenda with the supporting documents. He hears a knock on his side door. In the next minute he sees his assistant principal slipping into his office. Mr. Smith's face indicates that he is very upset. "Mr. Masters, I have just heard that some of the parents on your parent advisory group are going to ask for my removal. I have had to discipline many of their children and I know some of them did not like it. I came in to ask for your support."

"I have not had any parent come directly to me to complain about your decisions, Mr. Smith. I have not heard any rumors about such a proposed action either. Please relax

and let me take care of this issue. I'm sure that you misinterpreted what someone has heard through the grapevine." With that Mr. Masters leaves for the Parent Advisory Meeting.

Six officers, from president to parliamentarian, fill the leadership positions on the council. These positions are strongly sought by many of the parents in the community. Some status and power are associated with each role. The roster of members for the advisory group has 12 names on it. The six officers are present when Mr. Masters steps into the conference room. Only four non-officers are present.

Mr. Masters greets the president, Mrs. Vicki Sterling. "Good afternoon. How are you? It looks like we have some interesting topics on the agenda today."

"I'm just fine, Mr. Masters. I am a bit anxious about some of the items on our agenda. It would be nice to get a timely start to our meeting. It seems that most of our members are present. Would you mind if we begin immediately?"

Mr. Masters looks at the agenda once again and says, "Let's proceed." The agenda looks harmless enough with the exception of the third item listed under Old Business. Discussion of the first two items, the graduation ceremony and the graduation party and dance, are handled smoothly. When the third item, Discipline Concerns, is mentioned, Mrs. Sterling asks Mr. Masters to explain once again the protocol for drug searches with the drug dog. Mr. Masters explains this in a straightforward way as he did last month. He includes the procedure for searching a student's locker and even personal items such as a purse. He concludes by reminding the parents that all of the procedures are included in the handbook that is available in the reserve section of the library.

Another member of the council wants to know how many drug-related incidents the school has experienced this year. Then another wants to know how many assaults have occurred on campus. A third parent asks about sexual harassment. After answering several more questions on discipline, Mr. Masters becomes concerned. He decides to make a general statement to bring the discussion to a close. The meeting then moves on to New Business and Adjournment.

Mr. Masters is puzzled about the nature and intensity of the questions. It is true that there has been a slight increase in discipline problems but he does not feel the increase is significant as enrollment is also increasing. His Assistant, Mr. Smith, was not named, and he cannot link any specific comment or question to him.

Late in the afternoon, Mr. Masters decides to call Mrs. Sterling. He asks if she has an explanation for the barrage of questions at the parent advisory council meeting. Mrs. Sterling explains that a couple of the parents in officer positions feel that Mr. Smith is not doing his job. Other parents are complaining about his treatment of their children. He is accused of being rude and arrogant whenever challenged by a parent. Even some of the teachers who have a child in the school are unhappy with Mr. Smith's judgment in handing out discipline assignments. In one case Mr. Smith assigned a child to clean the playground and recess area just because she had taken a Popsicle out of the cafeteria to eat after lunch. To some parents such treatment seems excessive and humiliating. Mrs. Sterling tells him that one teacher is beginning to organize a petition to be brought to Mr. Master's attention. Copies are to go to the Superintendent and each board member. That is all she knows.

The next morning Mr. Masters calls Mr. Smith into his office. He explains what happened at the council meeting. He also shares Mrs. Sterling's comments. Mr. Masters feels obligated to continue with what seems to him to be a logical explanation for the mounting problem. "It seems that you have a few communication problems with some of the community and school leaders. The problems may develop from what you say and/or how you say it. The pitch, tone and volume of your voice when you address someone are very important. Your non-verbal communication also influences how you are received or understood. Did you ever have any class in public relations that analyzed the communication process?"

"No, Mr. Masters, I have not had a class in public relations. Do you think all this is happening because I am Black?"

"In this case, I think you had better do a quick study of your own communication patterns with students, with parents, and with teachers. I see no problem with your communication with me. Perhaps when you are in the position of authority or power, you come on a little too aggressively. Remember, some parents called you rude and arrogant."