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CREATING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

“I always say culture is how people behave when their boss isn’t looking,” says Will Dean, CEO of Tough Mudder racing events. He’s talking about corporate culture, but he could just as easily be talking about schools.

Creating a school and district culture that brings about the best possible outcomes for kids means keeping everyone involved at their highest level, so you have access to those top skillsets your teachers, leadership and community bring to the table.

Collaboration is more difficult than it sounds

Chris Williams, Director of Big Hero 6, which won the 2015 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature, considers collaboration the most essential element to his team’s success, and also its biggest challenge. “In some ways, [collaboration] fights human nature,” he told an audience at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences. “We all want to be told, all the time, that…every thought we have is gold. But if that’s all you ever get, the story’s not going to get any better.” http://bit.ly/2yGFxWU

Collaboration is even more important in schools, where the awards season is the lifetime success stories of the students under our care. The following tips can help you build a culture of collaboration that catapults your students to success.

What exactly are we doing?

“Improving student success” and “making the school a better place to learn” are great goals, but they’re not specific enough for a collaborative effort. It’s important to create clear and quantifiable goals that can be achieved by your team, such as, “increase participation in after-school programs” or “build a new playground.”
“A shared vision and goals can lead to that sense of ownership. For example, identify your team’s shared vision of caring for students and student learning, set goals related to that vision, discuss how the team’s work can help attain those goals, and check in often to assess progress. The strong connection between the work and the vision of the team can help individuals see purpose and assume ownership in the process.” [http://bit.ly/2klsUhH](http://bit.ly/2klsUhH)

**Diversity brings great rewards, but it can also be a stumbling block**

*Harvard Business Review*’s research on collaboration discovered that team members did it more easily and naturally if they felt they were alike. “The differences that inhibit collaboration include not only nationality but also age, educational level, and even tenure. We have found that the higher the proportion of strangers on the team and the greater the diversity of background and experience, the less likely the team members are to share knowledge or exhibit other collaborative behaviors.” [http://bit.ly/2xeZp70](http://bit.ly/2xeZp70)

They also found that when there were more experts in the room, the less likely that collaboration would be successful. This is a particular challenge for schools, as there is so much diverse and educated talent to choose from.

The more smoothly you break down these barriers, the more likely your chance of successful collaboration.

A few ice breakers that focus on similarities should help. How many people have a pet? How many people go to church? How many people have kids? Emphasize the similarities and the recognition that they are equal members of the group, and give people the opportunity and encouragement to expand the relationships beyond that before getting to the contentious issues of what flavors of ice cream to purchase for the ice cream social.

**Personal investment can’t be assigned**

You will find that the people who are fired up about getting the new playground built are the same people who were concerned about the safety and outdatedness of the old playground. It sounds obvious, but it’s easy to forget that each of your volunteers has their own area of interest – and it’s best to work with those passions.

“Use a short interest inventory to get a sense of what projects are meaningful to members of your school community. List areas for which you have immediate need, such as data collection and analysis, short- or long-term planning, communication, or afterschool programming and ask respondents to indicate their interest in those areas. Provide several blank spaces for school community members to answer questions such as, “What talents or skills could you share with the school?” and “How would you like to become involved with making our school a success?” Then organize committees around areas of shared interest and provide a charge, or let them develop their own charge, that can focus their collective effort.” [www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=12512](http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=12512)

Organizing people around projects in which they feel personally invested will help to create a culture of collaboration by showing people that their talents and their personal investment are a key part of the school’s culture.
We are people who.... umm...

When you think of the culture of your schools, what comes to mind?

Harvard Business Review found that company culture was a huge aspect of collaboration, and it starts at the top, with assigning team leaders that are equally focused on the task and on building relationships.

“The debate has traditionally focused on whether a task or a relationship orientation creates better leadership, but in fact both are key to successfully leading a team. Typically, leaning more heavily on a task orientation at the outset of a project and shifting toward a relationship orientation once the work is in full swing works best.” http://bit.ly/2xeZp70

Can you think of potential leaders in your faculty you may have passed over because they were more relationship-focused than task-focused? Could they become great leaders with some coaching? Can one of the descriptions of your culture be “we encourage and mentor new talent”?

Celebrate the successes!

A key part of creating a collaborative culture is by recognizing and rewarding collaborative behavior. If your district has a communications department, they can be great allies here. Find ways to publicize success steps in your ongoing collaborative work, giving credit to those who have taken on new roles.

As the long-planned new school playground finally goes up, when the bond gets passed, when the district’s librarians report that students this semester checked out twice as many books as the previous semester, focus on the ways collaborative work has enhanced the school and the neighborhood.

It is important to use these opportunities for congratulations and celebrations to recruit new partners and fortify future collaboration. Everyone likes to be a part of a success story, and a celebration is a good opportunity to invite people into your next one.

Recognizing people’s diverse skillsets, honoring the ways in which people’s similarities make them good teammates, and rewarding successes, no matter how small, leading others to want to be involved, is how collaboration becomes rooted in the school’s culture.

Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, freelance writer and communications consultant who splits her time between Los Angeles and Olympia, Washington.
HARNESSING THE POWER OF STUDENT AND TEACHER VOICE: USING STUDENTS AND STAFF AS SPEAKERS, PRESENTERS, OR GUEST WRITERS

Effective communications are authentic communications. They resonate with people. They are moving and powerful. They feel real. But in many cases, our communications aren’t fully spontaneous. They have to be carefully crafted, vetted, and polished to make sure we are saying just what is intended.

Precise language can be critically important in many official communications, but there is a way to capture more of that authentic feel. Including student and teacher voice in your communications can balance out the more scripted pieces of your message. In addition, hearing directly from students and teachers can remind your audience what this work is all about.

Effective messaging is not just about what is said. It is also about who is talking. We hear things differently based on how we perceive the speaker. Sometimes the best way to get your point across is to get out of the way and let others do the talking – especially if those others are a trusted source like teachers or students.

Teacher power

Teachers can be incredible spokespersons. Many educators are articulate, passionate, and good with groups – natural traits for any public speaker. Others may not like public speaking but are skilled writers. Whenever possible, identify educators who are passionate about a topic you need to communicate and ask for their help. While good teachers are always busy, many will be willing to help share a message they believe in.

Ways you can improve your communications by adding a teacher voice include:

Having a teacher present at a school board or other district meeting.

Putting together a panel of teachers on a specific topic for a community forum or information session.

Having a teacher write a short quote for a press release, flier, or other written piece. Inviting a teacher to speak at a rally or community gathering.
Asking a teacher to write a letter to the editor or opinion piece for your local paper on a specific topic.

Asking a teacher to guest write an article, blog, or newsletter piece for either internal, external, or online distribution.

Having a teacher speak directly to a TV, radio, or print reporter about a specific topic.

Inviting teachers to serve as key communicators, widely sharing information on topics of critical importance to the school or district.

**Showcasing students**

When it comes to authenticity and honesty, nothing beats student voice. The simplicity, straightforwardness, and clarity with which children often speak can be incredibly powerful and can cut straight to the root of an issue. While many students will not be as polished in their writing or public speaking, with a little support they can be an incredible asset to your communications efforts. Ways to include student voice in your communications (with parental permission of course) include:

- Featuring student quotes and or stories in press releases, fliers, your website, or printed materials.
- Having students (or student panels) at community meetings or internal district meetings.
- Starting a student blog for your website featuring short pieces written by your students.
- Making students available to the media – in a supportive and structured environment.
- Featuring student speakers at school or community events.
- Encouraging students to write letters to the editor on education-related topics they are concerned about (the need for a new school, an upcoming bond, a new program they like, why they love their teacher, etc.).
- Holding student focus groups to capture student feedback and then summarizing this feedback for the general public.
- Holding a video, essay, or speech competition on a topic of public interest and then publicizing the winning entries.

**Supporting without scripting**

Whenever you give the mic – literally or figuratively – over to someone else, you give up a degree of power and control. While you cannot (and should not) fully control your alternate spokespeople, you can remain involved and supportive and set some parameters to ensure the message is effective.

It is important to set clear expectations early. Make sure your teacher or student is clear about what you are asking them to do and what everyone’s role will be. If you are asking for a written piece, do you expect to see it first? Do you have specific topics you want covered? Do you want to have editing privileges? If you are asking them to speak, do you expect to see a written draft in advance? Do they understand the time limits? Will you be offering public
speaking coaching or tips? If you will be working with the media, is this something they are familiar and comfortable with? Have you gone over what to expect and what to do if they are asked a question they are not comfortable answering?

Making sure everyone is on the same page from the beginning will result in a better end result and a more successful experience overall. Whenever possible, create a collaborative environment where you can provide tips and suggestions to strengthen their piece (you are the communications expert after all) but where their voice and personality shine through. Make sure you are clear that you are here to support them in getting their message out most effectively.

For educators, offering talking points or even a draft, if desired, is totally appropriate. However, make sure to encourage teachers to make each piece their own. Stress that you want to hear their thoughts and experiences. Students are less likely to understand how to take generic language and make it their own so sharing general topics or ideas for places to start may be the most helpful. It can be tricky to find the right balance between supporting strong messaging and over scripting. If something ends up sounding more like you than the student or teacher, it might be time to pull back on the support a bit.

Tips for supporting strong student and teacher presentations or written pieces include:

Offer public speaking or writing tips.

Provide media coaching and preparation and sit in on the interview whenever possible to provide onsite support.

Remind people to keep their stories personal and specific.

Discuss the elements of good storytelling.

Offer to review or edit written pieces with an eye to the specific venue or need. Stress your experience and your goal in helping them be most effective.

Ask them what types of support they need.

Share your gratitude for their involvement and time and explain why getting their story or message out there is important.

Resource links:

10 Tips for Improving Your Public Speaking Skills
www.extension.harvard.edu/professional-development/blog/10-tips-improving-your-public-speaking-skills

Three Things to Do to Prepare for a Media Interview
www.huffingtonpost.com/andre-bourque/3-things-to-do-to-prepare_b_6295132.html

10 Rules for Writing Opinion Pieces
www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-goal/improve-my-writing/10-rules-for-writing-opinion-pieces

Contributed by Crystal Greene, communications consultant
KEEPING CALM: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM FIREFIGHTERS AND POLICE

When arriving at an emergency scene, firefighters and paramedics usually walk, not run. They are trained that way. Walking briskly and purposefully is safer than running, especially when in full gear or carrying equipment. Furthermore, it helps firefighters and paramedics stay under control in the heat of the moment.

Police officers are taught similarly: Move only as fast as your field of vision allows. Make sure you’re seeing the whole picture and not overlooking where someone might be hiding.

First responders train regularly, so their reactions become almost automatic. We professional communicators don’t face the constant challenges of emergency responders. Rarely do we confront crises of the magnitude that they must handle. Still, we can borrow useful tools from their mental training: Stay calm. Stay focused. Stay in control regardless of the situation.

Think about how often we are confronted by upset, contentious patrons – or even colleagues. They push our buttons, sometimes deliberately. They are mad, frustrated, and want us to feel their pain.

No one benefits if we give in to the button-pushing, or if we let our personal ego override our common sense.

That is why we should train ourselves to remain calm, focused and respectful even when we are not being treated that way. That holds true regardless of whether we are dealing with people in person, on the phone or online Stay in control. Assess the situation. Don’t rush into argument.

Your mother probably told you to count to 10 if you got angry. There’s a good reason that adage has endured through the ages. We need to buy time instead of surrendering to our
anger or frustration. Experts in anger management say it’s critical to expand the microseconds between when we feel a surge of anger, frustration, or resentment and when we respond. Tip: It’s OK, even preferable, to not respond instantly. Silence gives us time to think. Don’t err by blurting a response, either by email or voice.

For communicators, self-control starts with listening. We dare not assume we know what a person is thinking when she/he starts complaining about a school policy, an incident or something else.

Often the best response in such a situation is a neutral one, such as “Tell me more.” Statements of genuine interest – assuming no eye-rolling is involved – can disarm a person who expects an argument. Again, such statements also give us time to think.

In contrast, we inadvertently put ourselves on the defensive if we think, “She doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” or say, “You’re wrong.” Likewise, if we counter with, “Why do you say that?,” the use of “why” puts her on the defensive by implying we don’t trust her.

People want to be heard, which is why listening remains the most important – and often overlooked – skill in the communication business. From listening, comes understanding. Consider this quotation from Grammarist.com: “The admonition to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes means before judging someone, you must understand his experiences, challenges, thought processes, etc. The full idiom is: Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes. In effect, it is a reminder to practice empathy.” [Italics were in the original.]

We have everything to gain by listening – by trying to put ourselves in the other’s shoes even when we’re sure we know his perspective. We might learn something new – and we should if we’re paying attention instead of thinking about our response. Our patience, our politeness and our listening will create goodwill.

I saw this in action recently when I overheard someone complaining at length to state police officers on duty in the state Capitol. Instead of responding with the typical, “That’s not our job – talk to so-and-so,” the two officers listened patiently, even though the person’s complaint had nothing to do with their duties. I suspect their grace neutralized the complainant’s ill feelings, at least temporarily.

Training pays off. As professional communicators, we need to continually practice and re-train ourselves on Rule No. 1: Listen.

Stay calm, be respectful, and actually listen.

Contributed by Dick Hughes, a communications consultant. Contact him at TheHughesisms@Gmail.com, Facebook.com/Hughesisms or @DickHughes on Twitter.
A new legislative session is around the corner in many states. So what should a school district do before the legislature convenes to ensure success once the bills start flying?

A few simple steps can pave the way for success. It is called governmental relations for a reason. Like most of our work, it has to do with relationships. To relate to your legislators, you need to know who they are, what they are interested in, how to reach them and when to reach them. You also need to find out how you can help them. Any good relationship is two-way. You are going to help them as much as they help you.

Know your public officials

First, find out who your state representatives and senators are. This can be a little tricky because school district boundaries and legislative districts are usually not the same. Often, a legislator will have constituents in more than one school district. It is important to compare district maps to make sure you identify who represents all of your district. Even a small portion of your district can include hundreds of voters.

Next, make a contact list, including staff names. This is important because you will not have time to find all of this information when you really need to get a message out. You will also want to be able to hand letters to your support staff with the instructions to “send to all of our state legislators” and not have to go through them one by one. Your memory is not that good, and you don’t have the time.

Contact them

Whether the superintendent or the legislator is new to their job, it is important to make that first contact. The sooner you open the lines of communication, the sooner you can start a very important relationship.

The first contact can be a letter including an invitation to meet. At the very least, the letter should include your superintendent’s contact information, contact information for other high-level staff in your school district. Do not give a legislator the contact information of someone who cannot help them. Make sure your legislators can reach people who are high up in the school district right from the start. Nobody likes to get the runaround or make multiple calls to find the right person.
Tell them about your district

The letter should indicate that you appreciate their advocacy on behalf of students and include demographic data, some achievement data and a few of your top priorities for the coming year. Budget information is important, but it should not be the first thing you mention. Indicate that you will be calling to set up a meeting at the legislator’s convenience. Make sure you follow through.

A legislator’s time is precious during the campaign season and again during the session. The sweet spot is during the interim, nowhere close to Election Day. Time your contact accordingly.

If the legislator has time to meet, have a succinct message ready to go. A fact sheet or one-pager about your demographics and budget should suffice. It is always best to have a leave-behind piece for legislative staff to file away. Bring business cards and offer a sincere commitment to help them with information requests and constituent issues.

During the meeting, be concise and to the point. Legislators are generally very busy. If you can schedule the meeting when they are not in campaign mode or session mode, fantastic. But even then, they do not have time to waste on too much small-talk or off-topic conversation. Better to finish early than to bore them and keep them from their next meeting.

Share your priority issues

In a perfect world, you would just be meeting and greeting. But in the real world, you probably have issues and concerns. Those need to be handled differently depending on your relationship with the legislator and their staff. If you know them well, you may be more direct. But if you are beginning a new relationship with a legislator, do your homework to avoid stepping on any toes. Make sure you are not assuming anything until you have established a good working relationship. And even then, it is a good idea to check for understanding.

If you have a legislative agenda, share it professionally. Passion for your school system is great, but remember that the lawmaker is hearing from a lot of interests, some of them in competition with each other for state funds. As tempting as it is to be a breathless advocate, your superintendent should also remember that they are a community leader and should understand some of the pressure the legislature faces because they face similar pressures in the school board room.

Invite them to visit

When time and schedules allow, meetings and tours in your schools are great. Some legislators will jump at the chance to come see students and staff. Others may be more reluctant, and that’s fine. But the legislator who actually talks to students and staff is likely to take away a story or two that will come up in their deliberations in the Capitol. Tour sites should be matched with legislator’s geographical boundaries or special areas of interest. Legislators like to see tax dollars being used effectively, so think of programs that will illustrate a new way of getting good return on investment.
Legislative relations programs are like exercise routines. **The best program is the one you actually do, not the one that sounds the best. So, do the basics. Reach out.** Provide information. Offer assistance in gathering information or addressing constituent concerns. Like any relationship, government relations really boils down to regular communication.

*Contributed by Jay Remy, communications consultant*

**TIPS FOR BETTER SCHOOL BOARD ENGAGEMENT WITH THE COMMUNITY**

Ask most parents what school board members do, and they might answer, “Attend school board meetings.” The monthly or bi-monthly board meetings are certainly a key part of board members’ responsibilities. But perhaps the board’s most important role is to engage the community in championing its schools.

That can happen in a lot of ways. Board members might advocate for more funding at the state legislature. They might write opinion pieces about school matters for the local newspaper. They could host community forums about important issues facing schools. The list goes on.

But some of the most critical engagement happens right in the boardroom. The board’s attitude toward community members in attendance, providing opportunities for public input and respectful interaction, shapes the community’s attitude about not only the board but the district.

Board members offer the community a window into the district’s operations and overall student performance. Through the board, the community gets to see what’s in the budget and the policies that shape district practices. When the board acts in a united, thoughtful way, it instills public confidence and in turn builds public support.

The more open and involved board members are in the community, the more opportunities there are for the community to engage with the district. And research clearly shows that schools with engaged parents and communities tend to be more successful.

An important byproduct of having board members who are engaged in the community is that they tend to have a better understanding of local needs. That in turn allows them to push for programs and policies that reflect those needs and community values. For instance, many districts over the years have reduced or eliminated the number of electives because of budget reasons. But some school boards have resisted such cuts because they are acutely aware of how much parents and community value them.
Some people think community engagement is an event, something that happens once or twice a year. In reality, it is an ongoing process in which the board and district work collaboratively to provide opportunities for parents and community members to be involved in their schools. This takes the shape of volunteerism, attendance at board meetings, participation on district committees, etc. The goal is to build a culture where all citizens – whether or not they have children in school – take pride in their schools and want to support helping all children get a quality education.

**Community engagement strategies**

There are a variety of strategies for engaging parents and others in schools. Some examples include:

Community forums: Some districts sponsor an annual forum on education where leaders give an update on the schools and outline critical issues. Afterward community members may break into small groups where they can offer feedback. It’s an effective way for board members to hear from patrons and better understand the underlying values, concerns and priorities of the community. And it gives patrons an opportunity to become more informed about the district, meet face-to-face with school leaders and board members, and share ideas and concerns.

Coffee chats: Host a coffee chat at a school or perhaps a local coffee shop or restaurant. Invite community members to stop by during a designated period of time to chat about the schools and district. Some will stay the entire time; others will drop in and out. Patrons appreciate being able to have an informal dialogue with their elected officials.

Lobbying: Many school boards believe one of their most important roles is to lobby legislators – whether it’s a plea for stable funding or for fewer mandates. Some districts invite their local legislators to a dinner prior to the start of the legislative session, so they can hear about pending legislation and make a pitch for schools. In some counties, the boards of all the school districts in that county sponsor a joint legislative dinner, knowing that there can be strength in numbers. Boards sometimes mount letter-writing campaigns to send messages to their legislators and recruit community members to join in the effort.

Study circles: Sometimes boards will invite parents and community members to participate in a study circle. This could be to address an important issue or perhaps to collectively read a book that raises interesting questions or ideas about education. Usually a study circle is composed of 10-12 people who meet regularly over a period of a few weeks. At the end, they offer feedback and perhaps recommendations to the board.

Focus groups: Focus groups can be a useful tool for gaining a better understanding of how the community feels about different issues. Focus groups are facilitated meetings of small groups of people, typically 8-12. They can be a first step toward conducting a larger community conversation. For instance, districts considering a construction bond might want to conduct focus groups at the different schools and with targeted groups such as business leaders and senior citizens to gauge support for different components of a potential bond.

Polling: Surveys are an important tool in assessing community views on specific issues, such as perceptions about the district, budget concerns or support for a bond or levy. These can be
as simple as a SurveyMonkey sent to all parents or a broader telephone survey conducted by a professional polling firm.

There's no one best method of community engagement. As with communication, there are multiple tools for reaching out to the community and inviting dialogue and involvement. Most important is that boards show through their actions that they value community engagement and recognize that schools are better when parents and community are involved.

*Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant*

For children and teens, digital devices don’t compete with other areas of their lives – they are an essential part of daily life. Estimates are 75 percent of teens and tweens use a smartphone on a daily basis.

Parents may disagree with the role technology should play, but most understand that it is here to stay. The influence of technology and participation in digital life will continue to grow.

Parenting today is more challenging because of potential hazards students are exposed to online. To keep children safe in the digital world, they must be aware of the risks and attentive to their children’s’ digital lives.

The following statistics about teen digital use are from an infographic called “Parenting in the Digital Age,” published by the Family Orbit blog:


**How big is the problem?**

92% of teens go online daily.
24% of teens are online almost constantly.
78% of American teens have cell phones.
91% of teens access the internet through mobile devices on a regular basis. Most teens have multiple ways of accessing the internet.

Frequent use of smartphones and the internet are not a cause for concern by themselves. The problems stem from overuse and exposure to unsafe people or content in the digital world. Experts recommend steps parents can take to increase student safety.
What are the risks?

**Addiction:** Smartphone addiction is similar to other forms of addictive computer use. “iPhone Separation Anxiety is a real phenomenon, associated with feelings of unpleasantness, increase in heart rate and blood pressure, and decreased cognition. About 12.5% of people are outright addicted to their smartphone.”

A web search for information about smartphone addiction yields top search results by credible medical websites webmd.com and psychologytoday.com. This is a disorder that mental health professionals are concerned about and are offering advice to help kick the habit. They suggest being conscious of high-use situations, being strong in resisting the temptation to respond to rings and alerts, and being disciplined about when and where you use your phone. All good advice that may be less effective for teens who already struggle with adolescent impulse control. www.webmd.com/balance/guide/addicted-your-smartphone-what-to-do#1

Responsibility for managing, or limiting, phone use must fall to parents. Set guidelines for when and how long teens can use their phones. Require that they stow them in another room at night. Above all, be sure they understand the dangers of phone use while driving.

These limits are not easy to enforce. Parents may want to consider fighting fire with fire when restricting phone use. There are apps to help manage internet access, such as Xfinity xFi for Comcast (http://xfin.tv/2hLJh69), which lets subscribers turn off wifi on home networks for individual users. This technology can help ensure that children are complying with limits on technology use.

**Online predators:** Concern about online predators and harassers is not new, and there is no easy solution:

Aside from the obvious risks of online predators and access to inappropriate online content, there are a growing number of concerns about how students use their smart phones and the potential dangers they may be exposed to:

69% of teens regularly receive personal messages online from people they do not know.
64% of teens post photos or videos of themselves, while 58% post information about where they live. Females are far more likely than males to post personal videos of themselves.
19% of teens have been harassed or bullied online, and girls are more likely than boys to be harassed or bullied.

**Sexting:** Sending sexually suggestive messages and photos to friends and people only know online is another serious risk to teens. Almost 40 percent of all teens have sent a sexually suggestive message. It’s a problem for the teen who sends the explicit photos and may later find that they have been distributed beyond the intended recipient. It’s also a problem for students who distribute those messages and may find themselves in legal trouble for sending these types of photos of other students – who are minors.

**What can parents do?**

Parents who are trying to protect their children from online risks don’t have an easy job. All recommendations involve regular communication, oversight, review of online activity and clear guidelines:
Monitor text and multimedia messages through cell phone monitoring apps.
Block the use of apps you don’t approve.
Monitor or control internet use.
Learn the apps your children are using.
Restrict screen time.
Regularly review your child’s photos and videos.
Keep the computer in a common area of the house and set limits on use.
Consider setting an occasional family screen-free