

ON-DEMAND PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SERIES



EPISODE 3

Providing Effective Growth Feedback to All Teachers



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doodles and notes

Why provide feedback to all teachers?

SKILLFUL TEACHING IS THE PRIME MOVER OF STUDENT SUCCESS, AND EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK DEVELOPS TEACHERS' SKILLFULNESS.

Here's the logic for providing feedback to all teachers: Many variables affect student achievement. The variable with the largest and most durable effect size is instructional quality. Instructional quality is largely a product of the teacher's skills, techniques, and approaches to teaching. These skills, techniques, and approaches are highly developable through feedback and coaching. Over time, school leaders who, through skillful feedback and coaching, can develop teachers and teaching create school cultures that attract and retain even more skillful teachers. And the cycle continues... to the great benefit of student learning. *"As research shows, the quality of teaching is the most important variable affecting student learning. As such, it follows that school and district leaders' most important job is to support teachers in improving their instructional practice."* (Stephen Fink from his study: *School and District Leaders as Instructional Experts: What We Are Learning, 2012*)

"Teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling." (Isaac M. Opper, from the Rand Corporation's research brief: *Teachers Matter: Understanding Teachers' Impact on Student Achievement, 2019*), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4312.html

Feedback provides another angle on instruction

It's helpful to remember that *we see with our minds, not only our eyes*. The value of receiving feedback from another person is not primary optical. The greater value is that an observer "sees" the instruction through a different mind than the teacher, not merely from a different optical vantage point. The observer is able to process classroom information through a different set of experiences, values, knowledge base, and context.

"We do not see nature with our eyes, but with our understandings and our hearts."

William Hazlitt

Focus on Strength, Ability, and Talent

In their best-selling book, *Now Discover Your Strengths*, Marcus Buckingham and Donald O. Clifton define talent as *"a recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied."* Neuroscientists define talents as synaptic connections that form strong neural networks in our brains. These networks are shaped by nature and nurture. Human beings grow and develop fastest in areas where they have talent. Their brains are wired for success in these areas. We grow and develop much more slowly, and our potential is less, in areas of non-talent. Again, from *Now Discover Your Strengths*, *"Successful individuals capitalize on their strengths and manage around their weaknesses"*. The ability of an administrator to see and understand the different ways a teacher is talented is one key to the development of that teacher.

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Remember... One brain – two jobs

Teachers have, as do all humans, a single brain that has two important, yet conflicting jobs. Our brain's first job is to protect us from threats in the environment. The brain's second job is to learn, grow, and develop. When providing feedback to teachers, administrators do well to remember that the teacher will be able to receive and utilize feedback to a greater extent if the feedback is provided in such a way as to not over-activate the teacher's self-protection instincts. Feedback is remembered and applied to a greater degree if it is offered without any hints of criticism, judgement, or evaluation. Instead of beginning an episode of feedback with *"I'm glad I had a chance to stop by today because there are several things in your teaching that need immediate attention..."*. An administrator might say... *"I'm glad I had a chance to stop by today. There were several effective practices going on. One that really stood out to me as being particularly effective was..."*. The first statement activates the brain's protection response. The second, since it does not signal any need for protection, activates the brain's learning response.



Traces of Talent

When a teacher applies an instructional talent or strength to an episode of teaching, the exercise of the talent leaves behind evidence. This evidence can be traced back to the underlying talent. Here are six dependable traces of talent:

SPEED

Talents spring from a teacher's highest speed, best connected mental networks. Whenever a teacher does something at high speed, perhaps even going too fast, that's an indication that the teacher is using one of their high speed, talent networks.

EASY

When a teacher is employing one of their high ability areas, they often do not struggle much with it. It seems commonplace, even easy.

FLEXIBLE

It is difficult to be flexible, creative, or innovative at something when a teacher is doing it for the first time, or if they are not yet comfortable with it. Note when a teacher behaves more like a chef than a cook- no recipe needed.

RECURRING

Talents don't hibernate. Teachers return to them often and use them frequently. Notice recurring patterns in a teacher's practice.

“Hard work beats talent when talent fails to work hard.”

Kevin Durant

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CURVE BALL

When something unexpected happens in a classroom, teachers spontaneously revert to their highest speed, most likely to be successful, moves. Keep track of how teachers respond to curve balls. They dependably point back to talents.

SATISFACTION

Successfully applying one's talents to a challenging situation creates a sense of accomplishment. This sense of efficacy is deeply meaningful and satisfying. A notable sense of pride in one's work turns out to be a true indicator of a talent well applied.

Effective feedback is timely

As with all interpersonal interactions, timing is important. With respect to providing feedback, the word timely represents two separate characteristics.

Timely means frequently. When administrator feedback is infrequent, the sense of anxiety around an episode of feedback is greater. When feedback is frequent,



each individual episode of feedback is less likely to feel like a high-stakes moment. As a stretch goal, administrators do well to aspire to providing each teacher some kind of feedback twice per week.

Timely means right away. Delayed feedback is not worthless. It is, however, worth less than immediate feedback. Immediate feedback positions the interaction very near the actual teaching episode which means the teacher will be able to remember more details. Teachers teach many lessons each day. Delayed feedback requires the teacher to think

back across several, perhaps many, other teaching episodes. This thinking back process produces less and less accurate recall over time. Also, delayed feedback provides the teacher with too much opportunity to imagine what the administrator's eventual feedback might actually be. When denied information, the human brain tends, as a survival function, to imagine the worst-case scenario.

Effective Feedback is specific

Specific [spi-sif-ik]-- adjective: having a special application, bearing, or reference; explicit or definite. (Dictionary.com)

When speaking with teachers about observed episodes of instruction, it is good to remember the benefits of making that feedback specific, rather than general. General feedback is more valuable than no feedback at all, but it pales in comparison to the wide-ranging positive effects of specific feedback.

“Sometimes you can't see yourself clearly until you see yourself through the eyes of others.”

Ellen DeGeneres

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If a classroom observer were to say *“Mark, I very much enjoyed your lesson today. Your students are really responding to your teaching. Keep up the good work.”* That’s a nice compliment, and many teachers would be happy to receive it. It doesn’t, however, give the teacher much to go on if he’s interested in improving his lesson. Let’s try that again with a little more specificity. *“Mark, I very much enjoyed your lesson today. One thing that I thought particularly effective was how you regularly asked your students to turn to a shoulder partner and verbalize what they were thinking. I noticed that you were carefully listening to their conversations so you could gauge their levels of understanding and use that information to decide what to do next. That process was really benefitting your students today. Nice work.”* Hear how the increased specificity provides the teacher not only a professional compliment, but also describes the specific technique that was responsible for the positive outcomes. With this higher level of specificity, the teacher can take action based on the feedback. Mark can use the technique more often, expand on it, collect more and different information, use variants of the technique, and/or combine it with other effective practices. It’s difficult to take action on *“I enjoyed your lesson. Keep up the good work.”*



Let’s get specific about the benefits of getting specific.

SPECIFIC FEEDBACK IS ACTIONABLE

The value of a bit of feedback is relative to the extent that the receiver of the feedback can use the feedback to create or add value to the teaching and learning process. A compliment is nice and often appreciated, but a compliment, by itself, is not actionable enough to create or add value.

SPECIFIC FEEDBACK IS AFFIRMATIONAL

When feedback is specific, it reveals a higher level of attention and effort on behalf of the observer. This affirms the teacher’s good work. The subtle message communicated by specific feedback is that the teacher’s work is worthy of the observer’s focused attention, great effort, and careful analysis. Conversely, general or vague feedback sends a clear message that the teacher’s work does not merit the observer’s careful consideration.

SPECIFIC FEEDBACK BUILDS THE OBSERVER’S CREDIBILITY

Think, for a moment, about the teacher’s thinking as she is receiving extra-specific feedback from an observer. In addition to considering the feedback, the teacher can’t help but think *“This is really specific feedback. My observer was obviously working pretty hard on my behalf to collect this feedback and is pretty knowledgeable and enthusiastic about teaching in general and, at this moment, my teaching in particular.”*

One of advice columnist Dear Abby’s most requested reprints is her advice on how to give a proper compliment. Her advice... I’m sure you’ve guessed it. Be specific. Just as with the feedback tips above, a specific compliment is more valuable and memorable because it reveals extra effort and insight on the part of the provider and evokes a stronger, more positive response from the receiver.

All Feedback is powerful. Specific, skillfully delivered feedback is memorable, and sometimes transformational.

“Feedback is the breakfast of champions.”

Ken Blanchard

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Bibliography and Additional Resources

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