



Trust-Based Observations: Maximizing Teaching and Learning Growth

By Craig Randall (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021)

S.O.S. (A Summary of the Summary)

The main ideas of the book:

- ~ Traditional observation models do not improve teaching and learning. A complicated, “high stakes” approach creates a culture of fear rather than innovation.
- ~ *Trust-based observations* work because they put relationships first. Teachers take inspired risks and achieve greater results when they feel safe and supported.

Why I chose this book:

I love this book because it affirms the power of teacher-principal relationships in raising academic achievement. As we face yet another year of uncertainty, school leaders must find ways to help teachers replace their concerns and fears with a sense of safety. While Craig Randall’s focus is on the observation process, his strategies can help principals build better, more trusting, relationships with teachers every day. Trust, in turn, leads to innovation and student success.

Randall attributes the failure of current observation models to a lack of trust. When teachers are worried about making mistakes during high-stakes evaluations, they play it safe rather than take the necessary steps to improve. He developed *trust-based observations* (TBO) to help school leaders rebuild a culture of safety and innovation. The end result is an observation process that truly improves teaching and learning. In TBO, Randall challenges principals to engage in daily classroom visits and reflective conversations, and he encourages leaders to emphasize teacher strengths over classroom errors. In this environment, teachers feel safe to stretch their creativity and expand their skills.

The Scoop (In this summary you will learn...)

- ✓ Why traditional “high stakes” observations stifle innovation and seldom improve teaching and learning
- ✓ How to design a successful observation process that fosters a culture of trust, innovation, and growth
- ✓ A step-by-step approach to leading *strengths-based* observations and *reflective* conversations with teachers
- ✓ Practical tips to manage daily observations and make the most of every classroom visit
- ✓ Ways to connect individual observations with timely professional development across the school
- ✓ The Main Idea’s professional learning suggestions to examine and improve your own teacher observation process.

Introduction

If you ask teachers to describe their experiences with traditional observations, you are likely to hear comments such as “It all feels so impersonal – they observed my class but then *emailed* me their feedback,” “I haven’t been observed in years,” or “I get so nervous, they only see me at my worst!” As a teacher, Craig Randall felt frustrated with the observation process, too. He craved feedback on how to improve and like most teachers, he wanted more than the standard “twice-a-year, pre-conference, observation, and post-conference” experience.

Once he became a principal, Randall set out to improve teacher observations. He believes the key to success is for principals to spend significant time each day observing teachers and engaging in reflective conversations. **Frequent classroom visits** coupled with **genuine discussions** form the foundation for *trust-based observations*.

When Randall’s team shifted toward a more frequent, reflective observation model, they made some important discoveries:

- **Teachers were thankful to be observed regularly.** Many shared that in their entire careers, they had not been observed as much as they had in one year with Randall and his team. Their enthusiasm toward regular observations and discussions affirmed the fact that teachers want to grow, they just need to feel safe as they step outside their comfort zones.
- **Teachers were not always aware of their own capabilities.** To build trust, Randall’s team focused on “noticing” and discussing teachers’ strengths. He realized that his *strengths-based approach* helped teachers see and reflect more deeply on their teaching.
- **Building the strengths of individual teachers improves teaching and learning across the school.** When principals know which teachers are good at which skills, they can tap into these strengths by having them lead professional development. Without being in classes frequently, there is no way to know where a school’s strength lies.

Over time, Randall formalized his *Trust-Based Observation* (TBO) process to help others improve teaching and learning in their schools—this book is a result of his work. TBO, as outlined in this text, provides a clear path for principals seeking to make teacher observations more rewarding and effective.

Section 1: Observation Problems and Solutions

The Problem with Current Observation Models

Despite efforts in recent years, the work to strengthen the observation process has not resulted in measurable improvement in our schools. Classroom visits remain infrequent, and time-consuming, complex rating systems leave teachers and principals overwhelmed. Most principals today see observations as little more than “a necessary evil, a duty to be done, or a box to be checked.”

According to Randall, the problem is two-fold: **infrequent observations** coupled with “**high-stakes**” **evaluations** create a culture of fear, rather than innovation. Instead of seeing observations as an opportunity to try new things and make improvements, most teachers feel the need to “play it safe” to avoid poor ratings. Rather than helping teachers improve, we inadvertently teach them to avoid risks. But without risk, teachers can’t get better. We contribute to teachers’ negative feelings about observations when we fail to consistently observe them, we email our feedback or omit it altogether, or we try to convince them there is only one “right way” to teach.

The Solution: Trust-Based Observations

The goal of *trust-based observations* (TBO) is to eliminate ineffective, fear-based observations to improve teaching and learning. Ultimately, we want to create conditions where teachers feel safe to work alongside their principals as they design new approaches to learning and make needed improvements. To do this, we must emphasize growth and improve trust and safety with teachers. While Randall admits that the call to build relationships is not new, he believes that its importance is not integrated into the observation process in most schools. Without a culture of trust, it is almost impossible for innovation, risk-taking, and growth to occur.

Conditions Necessary to Build Trust-Based Observations (TBO)

At the heart of the TBO approach is the importance of building trusting relationships while breaking down the barriers that inhibit innovation and growth. Let’s take a closer look at these essential conditions now.

Condition 1: Build safe, trusting relationships. Unfortunately, many teachers do not feel supported. While high-stakes, i.e., *graded*, observations are one reason for a lack of safety, Randall believes an even bigger reason is that leaders aren’t focused on **trust and safety** as a necessary part of the observation process. Principals can build this trust by openly acknowledging the *vulnerability* that is inherent in teacher observations. There is no other job where the boss comes into an employee’s office, watches her work, and then leaves (and leaves the employee to worry and wait until the boss has time to share their thoughts on her performance). When principals acknowledge how stressful this situation can be – and actually empathize with their teachers – they build a culture of safety.

Principals can also build trust by committing to **face-to-face follow-up conversations**. This is an important opportunity to support teachers’ growth and strengthen personal connections. To make the most of this time, principals should focus on teacher strengths, ask reflective questions, listen intently, tailor the conversation to meet each teacher’s personality and needs, and “channel their most empathetic” selves. Randall believes it takes significant time and effort to build trusting relationships. For this reason, he advises that dedicated principals should spend at least **one hour a day** observing and discussing what they see with their teachers. *Note: Specific scheduling suggestions are discussed in Section 2: The TBO System.*

Condition 2: Change the way we evaluate teachers. While it is often necessary (and practical) to tie teacher *evaluations* to the *observation* process, we must do this in a way that does not contribute to the “play it safe” mindset. To do this, principals should avoid “rating” or “grading” teachers’ pedagogy as part of the observation. These ratings often become an obstacle to growth because no matter how fair or inconsequential the rating system may seem to principals, the fact is that teachers still see them as *judgments*. In order to avoid negative judgment, teachers often shut down or become compliant which stifles innovation.

Eliminating the evaluative rating of pedagogy *doesn’t* mean getting rid of rubrics, it just means using them differently. Rubrics have value as self-assessment tools that can be used to guide next steps in development. Used in this way, pedagogical rubrics foster reflection and growth without inhibiting innovation and risk taking.

Ideally, Randall believes we should change our focus from *pedagogy* to **teacher mindset**. To do this, principals should use their post-observation discussions to explore teachers’ beliefs about improvement. *The question we want to uncover is this: Is this teacher willing to take positive steps to increase student success?* When teachers possess a growth mindset (e.g., embrace risk-taking and innovation) and are willing to do what it takes to get better, improvement is possible.

In the next section, we will take a look at the specific actions principals can take to build successful, trust-based observations.

Section 2: The TBO System

Trust-based observations have the power to improve teaching and learning across a school. When principals commit to a *continuous cycle* of observation and reflection with every teacher, they build meaningful connections that support professional growth. Below are the foundations of trust-based observation practices, including tips to help principals manage this process day to day.

Trust-Based Observations Defined

Most observation models today encourage “frequent” or “more” classroom visits but fail to provide the specific details principals need to make real change. Randall provides concrete guidance: Principals should engage in a continuous cycle of twelve 20-minute observations each week (followed by short reflective conversations the next day). In a regular week, the cycle is as follows:

Monday	Tuesday – Thursday	Friday
Three observations	Three observations & three reflective conversations each day	Three reflective conversations

The lighter load on Mondays and Fridays makes the heavier mid-week schedule more manageable. Omitting observations from the Friday schedule also ensures that reflective conversations can be completed in the same week the observation occurs. While this *continuous* model may seem more difficult to manage than a traditional one, Randall assures us the opposite is true. The TBO schedule (with twenty-four short visits per week) builds a routine where principals observe and converse with teachers every day. This **habit** of frequent interaction is easier to maintain than trying to “squeeze in” observations at random times during the year.

Frequent observations are also more manageable when principals adhere to the other essential tenets of TBO. Specifically, TBO visits should be **short, continuous, unannounced, and equal**. Let’s look at each of these important components, below.

Short: 20-minute observations and conversations are ideal for maintaining frequency and relevance. In essence, they are long enough to provide a meaningful picture of teaching and learning and short enough to make weekly scheduling manageable.

Continuous: Randall calls the current, infrequent observation cycle “laughably insufficient.” Routine visits are the only way to build comfort and trust. Frequent feedback also helps teachers make timely adjustments as they implement new strategies.

Unannounced: Even the most confident, experienced teachers will put in extra planning effort when they know they are going to be observed. Therefore, unannounced visits provide the most accurate and authentic view of teaching and learning. Observers must see the real thing in order to help teachers grow.

Equal: When principals observe all teachers equally, they send a valuable message about the importance of maintaining a growth mindset. When every teacher is observed equally every year (with some on improvement plans receiving extra visits), school leaders can maintain accountability and support every teacher, even expert and part-time teachers.

Managing the TBO Schedule

Randall admits that maintaining the TBO schedule takes time and commitment. Too often, principals feel tied to their desks, overwhelmed by their day-to-day managerial duties. Committed principals spend more time in the classroom when they learn to prioritize *teaching and learning* and understand that the best way to help students is to support teachers in their classrooms.

The most successful TBO principals also build in scheduling and organizational tools to manage the process. For example, Randall tells principals to utilize 20-minute windows of time throughout the day, rather than trying to block out an hour or more for back-to-back visits. It's often easier to find these "small chunks of time" (e.g., before or after lunch or other meetings). Even when principals do block out larger chunks of time, they are often called away to deal with other issues.

To manage daily visits, Randall also suggests principals create and maintain several organization tools, including online folders and documents to support observations. **The following online tools can help busy principals build a successful TBO routine:**

Observation Folder: Create an electronic observation folder to house all related documents. This folder will include individual teacher folders, a copy of the [TBO Observation Form](#) (detailed in Section 3 in this summary), and daily scheduling information.

Teacher Folders: Within the observation folder, create a separate folder for each teacher. Each folder should contain completed *observation forms* and a separate *"notes" document*. In their "notes," principals can jot down areas for growth or other concerns they would like to keep off the primary observation form (so the TBO form remains focused on strengths).

The teacher folder should also include a *teaching and learning alignment document*. Once per semester, principals should extend their conversation time in order to discuss how the teacher's daily learning target(s) align directly with content standards and the teacher's summative assessment for that unit. This document can be used to record the learning targets, standards, and final tests or projects used to assess these skills.

Master Schedule: Principals should have access to a schedule of all teachers' prep and teaching periods to maximize scheduling.

Teacher Observation Spreadsheet: Create spreadsheets to track teacher observations and reflective conversations. Then, check off completed visits and conversations. Randall recommends observing one department at a time (e.g., once all math teachers are observed, move to science teachers, etc.) and creating a separate spreadsheet for each department, especially in larger schools. See a sample spreadsheet below.

For each teacher observation, write in the date and whether the visit occurred at the beginning (B), middle (M), or end (E) of class. When the reflective conversation takes place, **highlight** the date of the initial observation to indicate completion.

<i>Excerpt of a Sample Teacher Observation Spreadsheet</i>					
Teacher	September	October	November	December	T & L Alignment
Erin Algebra 9 Geometry 10	17 M/E	13M	8 M	10B	Sept: Yes
Ed Geography 9 History 10	12 B	13M	8M	11M	Oct: Yes
Maria AmLit 10 CreativeWr 11	12B	17 M/E	10M	10B	Nov: Yes

For more daily organization tips, including detailed steps for how to begin each day's observations, see Chapters 4 and 6 in the book.

Section 3: Creating Successful Classroom Observations

At the center of trust-based observations is the *TBO Observation Form* – which includes a series of questions and look-fors that leaders can use when observing teachers. *The ultimate purpose of the TBO form is to drive meaningful conversations about teacher growth and development.* This form is four pages long and is broken into fourteen sections. Each section focuses on an essential element of teaching that principals should look for during an observation, such as *student-teacher rapport, classroom management, and the use of differentiation.*

The *TBO Observation Form* is unique in that it can be used as...

An observation tool: Principals use the form during classroom observations to identify teachers' strengths. While some sections include charts or graphs to aid in the observation process, there are no "graded" or scored categories. Instead, the focus is on building trust in the process by "noticing" and recording teachers' skills.

A reflection tool: The completed form is shared with the teacher and becomes the basis for meaningful, reflective conversations after each classroom visit. Principals begin each follow-up discussion with "guiding questions" at the top of the form. These reflective questions build trust and empathy between the principal and the observed teacher.

A resource for growth: Each section of the form includes a list of *Toolbox Possibilities*, i.e., suggested classroom strategies. For example, the *Toolbox Possibilities* for the "teacher/student rapport" category includes *active listening, high expectations, and empathy.* These lists give principals look-fors to use during observations and serve as a resource for *both* teachers and leaders to learn more about solid teaching practices. The TBO Form includes hyperlinks to articles, books, and descriptions of classroom strategies for each section on the form (everything from *differentiation and feedback to questioning, cooperative learning and formative assessment.*)

Note: A downloadable copy of the form can be found at <https://trustbased.com/trust-based-observation-form/>.

Building the Right Observation Tool

Randall's goal in creating the *TBO Observation Form* was to identify "look-fors" – best practices that principals should watch for during classroom observations. The form helps principals identify what good teaching looks like in practice. While Randall initially looked to Danielson-like rubrics for guidance, he eventually designed an observation tool that was short enough for everyday use. He knew that if principals had to watch for too many things during an observation, they would be overwhelmed.

He describes his own experience with "bloated" observation forms this way: "That feeling of paralysis...is real. It often felt like the meat of the teaching was missed because of the struggle to notice all the pedagogical strategies." Randall admits that the observation form he created, described below, may leave off some strategies, but he feels the compromise was worth it to build an adaptable, easy-to-use tool.

The Trust-Based Observation Form

Below you will find a very brief summary of each section of the *TBO Observation Form*. To view the full form and read a thorough description of each part of the form, please see Chapters 5-9 in the book. You will notice there's a lot on the form, so know that you will *not* address every part of the form in each visit. In fact, it's best to focus on a few areas to ensure you have reflective conversations afterwards, not a laundry list of observations to dump on the teacher.

1. **Reflective Questions:** At the top of the form are several open-ended questions designed to encourage teacher reflection. They are used to guide discussions after an observation. The first two questions are: *What were you doing [during the lesson] to help students learn? If you had it to do over again, what, if anything, would you do differently?* These questions help teachers think about how their choices directly impact student learning. Section 4 of the summary will provide more guidance on reflective conversations.

2. **Learning Targets:** When principals first enter a classroom to begin an observation, they should look for and note the posted learning targets. Ideally, principals should see their teachers sharing "I statements" to introduce these goals at the start of class, using formative assessments during class to affirm student understanding, and reviewing the targets again at the end of the lesson.

3. **Innovative Practice/Risk Taking:** Randall includes this section on the form as a reminder that teachers must take risks in order to grow. Even though risk-taking may not be observed at every visit, this section provides an easy place to note when teachers try a new strategy or make an adjustment based on a previous observation and reflection cycle.

4. **Teacher/Student Rapport and Relationships:** Principals should also look for and note positive interactions between teachers and students as trust and connections are essential in the classroom. *Toolbox Possibilities:* One-to-One Interactions, Empathy, High Expectations, Active Listening, Humor, Feedback to Students, Respect, Encouragement, etc.

5. **Classroom and Student Behavior Management:** Student behaviors that interfere with teaching and learning can be detrimental in the classroom. Principals should watch for positive management practices that encourage student engagement. Strong transitions, clear expectations, and the use of proximity and redirection are just a few strategies to look for during observations. *Toolbox Possibilities:* Cooperative Learning, Responsive Teaching, Restorative Practices, Proximity Control, Student Choice, Clear Expectations, etc.

6. **Cooperative Learning:** When students work cooperatively, engagement and learning improve. Principals should look for the use of these strategies (*Toolbox Possibilities:* Think-Pair-Share, Heterogenous Grouping, Kagan Cooperative Learning Structures, etc.) and note students' on-task behaviors during these activities.

7. **Working Memory:** If students don't remember what they are taught, nothing is gained. Therefore, teachers must demonstrate their understanding of how students learn and retain information. Specifically, teachers should be "chunking" information to allow for approximately ten minutes of instruction followed by a minimum of two minutes of reflection and processing time. Note: the form includes a chart to help principals track this "10/2" split during observations. *Toolbox Possibilities:* 10:2, Chunk and Chew, 1-Minute Paper, Whiteboards, 1-Sentence Summary, Twitter Post, Sample Test Questions, etc.

8. **Questioning and Higher-Order Thinking:** To encourage learning and growth, teachers must focus classroom questions on higher-order thinking skills. In this section of the form, principals are provided a chart based on Bloom's Taxonomy to record teachers' use of challenging questions and wait time. There is also space to write down example questions from class.

9. **Formative Assessment:** In this section of the form, the principal is provided a chart to record **how** formative assessments are used, **who** uses them (e.g., teacher, student, peers), and the **type**. For example, students may engage in a peer revision writing activity or the teacher may use "in the moment" questioning to affirm student understanding. *Toolbox Possibilities:* Interviews, Confering, Mini Whiteboards, Questioning, Note-Taking, Graphic Organizers, Exit Slips, Online Ungraded Quiz, Plickers,

10. **Descriptive Feedback:** In this section, principals are provided a chart similar to the one used to track formative assessments. Principals should notice and note examples of varied and ample feedback for students, including *self*-, *peer-to-peer*, and *teacher*.

11. **Differentiation:** Principals will also look for examples of *differentiation*. Specifically, how does the teacher modify their content, processes, or assignments to meet learners' unique needs? The *Toolbox Possibilities* section includes a variety of strategies, including Flexible Grouping, Tiering, Graphic Organizers, Centers, Small-Group Instruction, Learning Contracts, Enrichment, RAFT, etc.

12. **Learning Principles:** It is important that teachers use a variety of methods to foster student engagement and growth. For example, classroom lecture and reading time should be balanced with discussion and hands-on learning. Principals should monitor the type (and variety) of methods the teacher uses throughout the lesson and encourage teachers to utilize the methods that are found to be most effective. *Note: The form includes a "learning pyramid" to help teachers and principals identify the best methods.*

13. **Student Interviews:** The goal of interviewing students during observations is to address a flaw in the traditional observation process. Specifically, *how do we know if students are learning if we focus solely on the teacher's actions?* Principals interview at least one student during the observation. For example, they might ask students to explain the learning targets or why they are relevant. While students may not be able to answer this type of question at first, they will become more comfortable once they see more observations taking place in their classrooms.

14. **Teaching "Intangibles":** *Teaching intangibles* refers to innovative practices that extend beyond the scope of the traditional observation form. This section is included to ensure we are not "pigeonholing" what good teaching looks like in practice. Here, principals might make note of a teacher's passion, their humanness in connecting to students and the material, or their ability to respond to learning moments in the classroom. Randall also calls this section a place to acknowledge "the art of teaching."

Tips for Successful Implementation

Principals who want to adopt the *TBO Observation Form* can use it in its entirety or modify parts to suit their specific goals. The important things to remember are:

- Don't add to the form without swapping something out to keep it from being too long.
- When meeting with teachers after the observation, always ask the reflective questions at the top of the form first.
- Focus on **teacher strengths** throughout the observation (and keep concerns on a separate document for later discussion).
- Remember that growth, risk taking, and innovation only occur in trusting relationships. Therefore, always follow up with reflective in-person conversations – never emails!
- You will not observe every category in a single visit or even over several visits. Do not be tempted to do so. And remember, in TBO, visits are so frequent that principals can be assured they will eventually see the overall picture of each teacher.
- Just like teaching, observing is a combination of craft, skill, and art. Trust what you notice and feel is important. ***By tapping into your instincts and using the TBO Observation Form as a guide, you become a well-rounded observer best positioned to help your teachers grow.***

Section 4: Engaging in Reflective Conversations

The *reflective conversations* that follow trust-based observations are where “everything comes together.” These one-to-one discussions are the heart of the TBO system because they give principals the opportunity to build trust, encourage risk taking, and help teachers grow. In this section we explore the steps principals can take to lead successful *reflective conversations* with teachers.

Memories fade quickly and the impact of post-observation reflections diminish with each passing day. For this reason, Randall insists that the best reflective conversations happen either the same day or the day after the initial observation. In a principal’s daily schedule, reflective follow-up conversations must be prioritized. Preparation is the key to success. There are several steps principals can take to ensure they manage day-to-day reflective conversations effectively and efficiently.

Steps to Ensure Successful Reflective Conversations

1. **Organize ahead of time:** To stay on schedule, principals should be aware of teachers’ (limited) prep times and if necessary, request meeting times in advance. Make sure the *TBO Observation Form* is ready and accessible in advance.
2. **Demonstrate respect and equality:** Reflective conversations should take place in teachers’ classrooms where they feel most comfortable. Principals should ask permission to enter the room when they arrive, for example, “Is now still a good time for our reflective conversation?” Sit side-by-side to establish a sense of equality and cooperation. This also conveys a sense of openness and transparency as documents can be seen and shared easily. These simple gestures help build trust.
3. **Begin by asking questions:** The reflective conversation begins with principals asking the reflective questions at the top of the *TBO Observation Form*. These include: *What were you doing to help students learn? If you had the opportunity to reteach the lesson, is there anything you would do differently? Is there anything you would like me to look for on the next visit (or anything you would like me to add to the form)?* In addition, there are questions related to the teacher’s professional development goals.

Beginning the conversation by asking questions sends the message that teacher voice matters, that teachers are equal participants in the observation process, and reflection is an expected norm. In addition, when teachers share first, their reflections tend to be more authentic (e.g., not influenced by the principal’s observations). When principals listen attentively and show empathy this sets a positive tone for the conversation. As teachers speak, principals should type and then read the answer aloud to ensure accuracy.

4. **Share strengths-based observations:** The next step is to share evidence of the strengths you noticed during the observation. Use notes from the TBO form as a guide. Before you begin, ask teachers to let you know if something they did well wasn’t noticed. This is a relationship-builder. Occasionally, it can be difficult to find evidence of good teaching aligned with the form. In these situations, don’t manufacture observation notes, instead, look to the category of “teaching intangibles” for creative solutions. Perhaps a lecture demonstrated excellent content knowledge, or a previously disruptive student led an engaging discussion. Focusing on teachers’ strengths, no matter how small, gives them the confidence they need to take risks. Risks are essential to growth.

5. **Offer suggestions at the right time:** Randall believes the first three reflective meetings should focus on strengths only (unless classroom management issues interfere with student learning or safety). ***The goal of this is to build trust and relationships.*** When you feel the teacher is ready to discuss areas for professional growth, you can provide suggestions. Feedback is most effective when it mirrors student feedback, specifically, it should be timely, consistent, actionable, and nonjudgmental. Unfortunately, most feedback we give teachers is the opposite. We provide teachers with so much evaluative feedback that we leave them feeling anxious and overwhelmed rather than motivated and inspired. Randall recommends these tips when it comes to offering feedback to teachers:

- **Timing:** Use your intuition to determine the best time to bring in feedback. Most teachers will ask for suggestions by the second or third meeting (but hold off until at least the fourth to keep relationship-building at the forefront). Randall suggests for reluctant teachers, often the most experienced teachers, it is okay to wait up to a year if it means the feedback will be better received.
- **Preparation:** Prepare both physically and mentally before giving feedback. Physically gather resources to share with the teacher to encourage growth and show you care. Mentally prepare by anticipating or role-playing potential resistance with colleagues.
- **Execution:** How we offer feedback matters. When possible, eliminate words that suggest a lack of choice (e.g., *should, have to, supposed to*). Randall suggests using invitational phrases, such as: *May I share a suggestion? or Would you be willing to try...?* As part of the feedback process, make sure teachers understand what supports you can provide, including additional training, resources, or classroom observations.

6. **Share the completed TBO form:** End the conversation by sharing the completed TBO form with the teacher and ensuring they approve of its final content. Before leaving the teacher’s room, complete the observation tracking spreadsheet to stay organized.
7. **Check for alignment:** Once per semester, extend the reflective conversation to check for three-way alignment between 1) the learning targets observed in the lesson, 2) the learning objectives/ content standards of the unit, and 3) the summative assessment for the unit. It’s essential that teachers focus on the right things and this twice-a-year check allows principals to look for this alignment.

Trust-Building Throughout the TBO System

Building trust is an essential goal of the TBO system – without it, growth is not possible. Every step of the process is meant to foster a sense of safety, respect, and connection:

- the continuous cycle of frequent visits builds familiarity and connection
- a focus on strengths, not ratings, helps teachers feel more confident and appreciated
- reflective conversations in familiar surroundings foster a sense of equality and collegiality
- thoughtful, well-timed feedback helps teachers see principals as partners in professional growth

When teachers trust their principals, they feel safe to take new risks to improve teaching and learning. This is why it is so important for principals to recognize the actions they can take *throughout* the TBO process to build trust. ***These trust-building actions include:***

Empathy and Vulnerability: Empathy, which Randall describes as “listening, withholding judgement, emotionally connecting, and letting others know they are not alone” is essential to building trust. Principals who show empathy, especially during the observation process, will build greater trust. Teachers can feel dangerously vulnerable during the observation and evaluation process as they feel their actions are being judged (often harshly) by others.

Even asking teachers to reflect on how they might have taught a lesson differently is asking them to admit they could have been better which requires a certain amount of vulnerability. Leaders who show their own vulnerability by admitting mistakes or asking for help are perceived as more trustworthy and courageous, too.

Equality and Respect: Avoid using formal authority, except as a last resort. Ego and positional power rarely build trust. Kindness, empathy, and active listening convey care and respect for others. Randall also reminds principals to “walk the talk and be of your word.” Personal integrity shapes how others see you, and teachers expect leaders to show consistency between word and action. Honor the fact that every teacher is a unique individual with unique strengths and challenges.

Teachers must make changes because they feel a *desire* to improve student learning, not because they feel pressured or worse, afraid. Outside pressure as a catalyst for growth is not sustainable. Teachers will be more successful if they make changes in a safe, supportive environment that encourages personal and professional development.

Section 5: Long-Term Professional Growth in The TBO System

While the real power of the TBO system lies in the continuous cycle of observation and reflection, there are two additional elements that contribute to its success: 1) trust-based evaluations and 2) a schoolwide professional development program. Both components solidify and support the long-term growth of teachers in the TBO system.

1. Trust-Based Evaluations

In the TBO system, teacher *evaluations* are similar to teacher *observations* in that they both emphasize collaboration and trust-building. During the evaluation process, principals work with teachers to compile strengths-based evidence and make improvement plans as needed. Randall recommends using a rubric similar to Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching to complete evaluations. He recommends assessing teachers in the following domains: *planning and preparation, communication and collegiality, professionalism, and mindset*.

Randall believes it is important to assess a teacher’s *growth mindset* because it leads to greater improvement and success over time. As we discussed in Section 1, Randall believes principals should not rate pedagogy. This reduces teacher anxiety and allows principals to keep the *observation* process (which does focus on pedagogy) as a separate coaching and trust-building tool.

The *TBO evaluation process* begins with teacher self-assessments. Teachers rate themselves on the four domains (*planning and preparation, communication and collegiality, professionalism, and mindset*) and provide examples of risk-taking and innovation in the classroom. Separately, principals complete their own evaluations and then compare their results with the teacher self-assessments.

Having the self-assessments for comparison provides valuable insights for principals as they are able to see agreed upon areas of strength, growth, and risk-taking. Similar to reflective conversations, the principal and teacher meet to discuss the results. If there are performance concerns, the teacher and principal reflect on the evidence and work together to develop an *action improvement plan*.

2. Schoolwide Professional Development

TBO incorporates schoolwide professional development in two ways. The first is through the *question of the year* and the second is through *professional development communities*.

Question of The Year: Most schools have shared areas of growth for teachers – professional development topics that would benefit almost all teachers. In the TBO system, leaderships teams create a “question of the year” based on an area of growth they would like to work on as a school. This question, such as “What did you do to formatively assess whether students attained progress towards classroom learning goals?” becomes the focus of individual and schoolwide professional growth plans for the school year. During every reflective conversation, individual teachers reflect on the question and share recent achievements (it is included in the “questions” section at the top of the observation form). Schoolwide support is provided through relevant trainings all year.

Professional Development Communities (PDCs): Teachers work together in small groups called PDCs throughout the year to grow their skills in one specific area. The primary aim is to improve student learning. Each PDC selects one of the teaching strategies from the *TBO Observation Form* to research and explore (e.g., *differentiation*, *cooperative learning*, etc.) PDCs provide teachers the opportunity to personalize their learning, as they are asked to select a topic that does not overlap with the “question of the year.” The goal is to foster a culture of innovation.

Bringing It All Together

Trust-based observations can take the fear out of classroom visits and foster a culture of collaboration and innovation. Randall offers some final advice for leaders looking to bring elements of the TBO system to their schools. His final suggestions include:

If full implementation of the TBO system is not possible right now, try a partial approach. Build greater trust with teachers by providing time for feedback and reflection after each classroom observation. If possible, do not rate every classroom observation. Save ratings for the end of the year to give yourself more time to build a sense of safety and collaboration. Lastly, consider piloting the TBO observation process with a few teachers. With teachers’ support, a pilot program may develop into a schoolwide change.

If you bring trust-based observations to your school, provide in-service training to your leadership team and teachers. Include training opportunities for your superintendent and district leaders, too, so they can support the growth of principals in the future. During the transition, own up to past mistakes. For example, if you were inconsistent with observations or did not provide in-person feedback, talk about how you would like to change and why it is important to you now. It is never too late to build trust, encourage risk-taking, and personally support your teachers’ professional growth.

Trust-based observations work because they put relationships and people first. Observations bring out the best in teachers because they feel safe to take risks as they strive to improve teaching and learning.

THE MAIN IDEA’S PD ideas for Trust-Based Observations

These activities are for the school leader and other leaders who conduct observations at your school. The first section will help you reflect on the teacher-observation process you *already have* in place. After that, there are activities to help your leadership team think about the role of *trust* in this process. Finally, the final section will help your leadership team *grow their skills* in teacher observation.

I. Where do we stand with our teacher-observation process?

A. Discuss the goal of your teacher observation and feedback process.

1. Gather your leaders (anyone who does observations at your school) to discuss the following:

What is the goal (or goals) of teacher observations at our school?

2. After participants share their ideas, briefly review Randall’s perspective (if it doesn’t come out in discussion).

The primary goal of teacher observations should be to improve teaching and learning. He believes the key to improvement is to ensure teachers feel safe and supported to try new strategies and take new risks.

Respond to Randall’s ideas and discuss: *In your mind, how effective is our current model in reaching these goals?*

B. Compare the components of your teacher observation approach and the trust-based approach.

1. Share the chart below electronically or by making paper copies. Ask leaders to work in pairs or as one larger group to examine the components of the trust-based observation approach (middle column) and compare it to your approach (third column).

Components of teacher observations	In trust-based observations...	In our current observation system...
Frequency: How often do leaders observe teachers?	Leaders engage in twelve, 20-minute observations each week.	
Follow-Up: How do leaders provide feedback to teachers?	Leaders follow up each observation with an in-person (never an email!) reflective conversation either the same day or the next day that is strengths-based and truly meaningful. These are discussions, not the principal talking at the teacher.	
Consistency: How regular are teacher observations?	There is a continuous cycle of observation and reflection.	
Priority: Is time set aside to make observations a priority?	Leaders spend an hour a day observing and discussing what they see with teachers.	
Goal: Are observations for growth or evaluation?	Observations are primarily for growth and leaders should avoid “rating” or “grading” teachers’ pedagogy as part of the observation.	
Length: How long are observations?	Observations are kept short (no more than 20 minutes) so they can be frequent.	
Trust and safety: Is this a foundation of the observation process?	Trust and relationship-building are the foundation for teacher observations. This takes time. Leaders only share positive feedback the first few observations.	
Equality: Are all teachers observed equally?	Every teacher is observed equally several times throughout the year (with an exception for serious performance issues).	
Planned vs Unannounced: How are visits conducted?	All visits are unannounced.	

2. Once the team has reviewed both approaches and completed the comparison chart, ask them:

- *Which elements in both models do you think most help teachers feel supported? Are there elements that might hinder growth?*
- *What are your biggest concerns regarding our current system?*
- *Which aspects of the trust-based approach would you most like to see integrated into our approach?*

C. Determine how well your leadership team knows your teachers' strengths and growth areas.

The goal of this activity is to get a sense of how often leaders have been observing teachers and how well they know their strengths.

1. *Before you meet with them, ask leaders to fill out a shared Google Sheet that looks like this for the previous semester:*

Teacher Name	Leader 1: # of observations?	Leader 2: # of observations?	Leader 3: # of observations?	This teacher's teaching strengths	This teacher's areas for growth
E.g., John Cho	3	2	0	Ldr 1: Clear objectives Ldr 2: Formative assessment Ldr 3: ???	Ldr 1: Relationships Ldr 2: Pace Ldr 3: ???
Maya...					

2. Discuss the following with the leaders after they've filled out this shared chart.

- *Based on the chart, are all teachers in our school observed equally?*
- *Is there any correlation between the number of observations you've conducted and how well you know a teacher's strengths?*
- *Is there any correlation between the number of observations and the trust or rapport you have with that teacher?*
- *What else does this chart reveal?*

II. Building Trust Between Teachers and Leaders

A. Discuss the connection between an effective teacher observation process, trust, and teacher growth.

1. Discuss: *What do you think is the connection between trust and a successful teacher observation process?*

Look at the connections Randall makes and comment:

Frequent visits ⇒ familiarity and connection

A focus on strengths, not ratings ⇒ teachers feel more confident and appreciated

Reflective conversations in familiar surroundings (i.e. the teacher's classroom) ⇒ a sense of equality and collegiality

Thoughtful, well-timed feedback ⇒ teachers see principals as partners in professional growth

B. Think about the role of vulnerability in building trust.

1. Discuss the connection between vulnerability and building trust

Principals can build trust by openly acknowledging the *vulnerability* inherent in teacher observations. Share this with the leaders:

There is no other job where the boss comes into an employee's office, watches her work, and then leaves (and leaves the employee to worry and wait until the boss has time to share their thoughts on her performance).

When principals acknowledge how stressful this situation can be – and actually empathize with their teachers – they build a culture of safety. Think about it, even asking teachers to reflect on how they might have taught a lesson differently is asking them to admit they could have been better which requires a certain amount of vulnerability. Discuss.

2. Have leaders watch this [Brené Brown video](#) (click link) on vulnerability and discuss it.

You might want to start by sharing this quote from the video and asking how it applies to teacher observations: "Vulnerability is the birth place of innovation, creativity, and change."

3. Have leaders share mistakes they've made.

Remind the leadership team that leaders who show their own vulnerability by admitting mistakes or asking for help are perceived as more trustworthy and courageous, too. Bring their attention to this quote from the Brene Brown video:

"If you're not in the arena also getting your a— kicked, I'm not interested in your feedback."

Have leaders discuss how they might show teachers that they, too, they are "in the arena" (on the receiving end of receiving feedback) or ask them to experience a bit of vulnerability by sharing with the team a time they made a significant professional mistake.

C. Examine whether the leaders' actions are building or inhibiting trust.

1. Have leaders look at the chart below (excerpted from pp.107-110 in the book) and self-assess their own trust-building actions.

Ask leaders to individually reflect on (and perhaps write about) this question:

- *Which of the following actions (in the chart below) do you engage in with teachers (make a mental or written note for how frequently – rarely, sometimes, often)?*
- *Are there other trust-building actions that you also take with teachers?*

Observers' Actions that Build Trust	Observers' Actions that Undermine Trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be patient rather than immediately offering suggestions to fix things. • Understand that each teacher is unique – differentiate conversations accordingly. • Walk the talk. If you say you're going to do something, do it. • Don't use your official authority other than as a last resort. • Express concern about issues affecting teachers' lives outside of school. • Look for the potential in your teachers, even when that's hard. • Demonstrate your own vulnerability in front of teachers – even if that's just admitting a mistake. • Suspend judgment. You catch more flies with honey. • Always make sure your actions are driven by the ultimate goal – to improve teaching and learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relying on your formal authority – positional power. • Demanding rather than offering a suggestion. • Making judgments – particularly quick ones. • Playing favorites. • Being impatient and offering quick fixes. Trust takes time. • Perfectionism and the mindset that expects this from others. • Rigid mindsets, particularly when it comes to what good teaching is. • Shaming, belittling, or ridiculing. • External pressures that lead to negative actions – like pressure from the district or school board to increase scores or get ahead. Focusing on the product rather than the process hurts relationships.

2. Have leaders share and commit to one new trust-building action. Ask if any of the leaders want to share their general reactions to this chart. Finally, go around the group and ask each person to commit to one new trust-building action they would like to work on.

III. Growing Our Observation and Pedagogical Skills as a Leadership Team

A. Explore the pedagogical strategies embedded in the TBO Observation Form.

Give leaders time to explore the [TBO Observation Form](#) (hyperlinked here) to see if the team might want to use it, or elements of it, in your school's teacher observations.

To examine the form more closely, divide up some of the *Toolbox Possibilities* topics (like Teacher/Student Rapport, Formative Assessment, and Differentiation) and give leaders time to click on links and learn *one* new strategy online that is listed on the form.

Bring everyone back together and ask each leader to share the new pedagogical strategy they learned and whether they think the school should adopt all or some of this form for teacher observations.

B. Grow your observation skills as a team by watching videos of teaching clips.

Whether you use the observation form or not, it is useful for all leaders who observe teachers to come together regularly to watch teaching clips (from your school or outside) and share observations.

1. Record some short videos of your teachers teaching or find some clips online. Watch a short teaching clip together. Because this book emphasizes trust as an essential element of feedback conversations, imagine this is one of the leader's first three observations in which *only positive comments* are shared. As a group, brainstorm as many positive comments as you can that you might make to this teacher.

2. Then, imagine this is a visit later in the year. Have leaders share *one* suggestion they might make to this teacher to improve. To generate ideas, have the leaders look at the [TBO Observation Form](#) and consider sharing a strategy from the *Toolbox Possibilities* sections that might help this teacher improve.

C. Commit to a schedule and get started on those observations!

Many leaders don't get into classrooms and have follow-up conversations because they don't prioritize these actions. Whether you decide to use the teacher-observation form or not, make a plan for *next week* (or create a recurring schedule where you observe and debrief at the same times each week with exceptions) to get into classrooms by using the schedule below. Choose **12** teachers to start with. Look at your master schedule and schedule a 20-minute block of time to observe each teacher and a 20-minute block of time to debrief with them during a prep or other available time. Be sure to ask the teacher to save this time for a chat even if you are keeping the classroom visit the precedes it unannounced.

Monday	Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday
3 Observations	3 Obs & 3 Convos		3 Obs & 3 Convos		3 Obs & 3 Convos		3 Conversations
Obs 1:	Obs 1:	C1:	Obs 1:	C1:	Obs 1:	C1:	C1:
Obs 2:	Obs 2:	C2:	Obs 2:	C2:	Obs 2:	C2:	C2:
Obs 3:	Obs 3:	C3:	Obs 3:	C3:	Obs 3:	C3:	C3:

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