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How to Open a Can of Worms: A Principal's Guide to Having Difficult Conversations with Teachers

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1. Identify Your Objective Before the Difficult Conversation Begins.

When a principal sits down to evaluate a teacher's lesson what is one of the first items they always look for? A clearly stated objective.

School leaders understand, more than any other professional leader in any other industry, that objectives should be the foundational pieces of learning. Clearly identified objectives keep those who are delivering content focused on the desired outcomes from students. Difficult conversations with teachers are no different.

When school leaders become aware of a situation that may require a difficult conversation they should always begin by collecting objective facts (there will be more about collecting information later). If the school leader determines the situation warrants a difficult conversation the next step is to establish an objective, or determine, "*What do I really want as a result of this conversation?*" One of my favorite books on the topic of effective employee communications is titled *Crucial Conversations*. In the book the authors suggest leaders

should ask themselves one very important question prior to a difficult conversation, *“How would I behave if I really wanted these results?”*

Leaders have to decide, do they want to win an argument, or change behavior and maintain professional working relationships. When difficult conversations begin, no matter how carefully a leader has prepared, employees may initially choose to react with anger. Some employees may choose to be confrontational as a method to deflect the message and cause the leader to take a step back. Understandably, dealing with reactions like these can cause emotions to spiral upwards. School leaders may then feel the need to regress to fight or flight instincts, and strong willed leaders are not about to lose a fight. This is where clearly stated objectives come in.

If leaders do not stay focused on how they would behave if they really wanted whatever objective was previously established, they may shift from wanting the staff member to change their behavior to letting a conversations gone wrong to slip into future job evaluations or even retaliation.

Many inexperienced leaders who are caught up in difficult conversations will respond to resistance or an attack from a subordinate with their own verbal or

personal attack and then act as though they had to “show em’ who’s boss.” Doing so is the most natural response, but it is not the response that maintains professional relationships and encourages dialogue that could eventually change behavior.

Objectives establish a true north in difficult conversations. Objectives can anchor elevated emotions and focus leaders on maintaining dialogue that leads to performance improvement, not subordinate submission. School leaders know objectives drive effective instruction. They should also know objectives can lead to more successful difficult conversations.

2. Attempt to Find Cause not Blame

Teachers understand struggling students often have precipitating factors that can affect their performance. However, it is far more challenging for leaders to explore factors that may be contributing to poor performance in other adults. Adults expect other adults to have it together, especially in the professional world.

While [effective teacher selection methods](#), and [school district onboarding programs](#) can go a long way to ensure staff members are prepared for the demands of leading a classroom, they cannot predict personal struggles or explore every facet that comes to light when teachers get in the classroom. When leaders are preparing for a difficult conversation regarding teacher performance, especially for newer teachers, or when taking over in a new building, keep in mind the training, expectations, and levels of accountability in the past will influence preparedness, effort, and ultimately performance.

When school leaders are discussing a performance issue with a staff member for the first time, avoid preconceived frames (more about frames in strategy #4).

Some basic questions that may help in the search for root causes include:

Do graduates from a particular college all seem to have the same shortcomings?

Did the newer teacher complete their student teaching within the district? If so, were the undesired behaviors that are an issue now documented and discussed during student teaching.

It is easy for veteran teachers who mentored and instructed emerging teachers within the district to say, "You know, I had a concern about their ability to (fill in the blank)."

A comment like that should be followed up with the question,

"Did you document that concern or discuss it with them?"

Difficult conversations are hard enough for leaders. Professors at colleges, cooperating or mentor teachers also have a difficult time finding ways to discuss personal performance issues, often hoping things "work themselves out" once they get on the job. As a result, school leaders are often the first person to ever provide negative feedback to a teacher who has been led to

believe their performance is without reproach, all because others have been waiting for things to work themselves out. For this very reason anyone whose responsibility it is to observe the performance of emerging or existing teachers should be trained on how to have difficult conversations.

School leaders should use initial discussions to explore the causes of the behavior instead of placing blame of poor performance on willful personal failings. If school leaders understand initial conversations with teachers who are struggling should be fact finding and not fault finding in nature, it should help ease the tensions and reduce the perceived conflict of difficult conversations.

Obviously school leaders who have already conducted initial conversations, established causes, developed interventions, and developed performance improvement plans or job targets can move beyond fact finding. When this is the case, refer to strategy #6.

3. Avoid Framing the Issue

It has become part of our human nature to frame issues before discovering all the facts. Think about it. In elementary schools students are taught pre-reading skills that include making predictions before the book is ever read to draw their interest into the story.

Establishing predictions is a great reading strategy, but as a leader making predictions or framing the issue before hearing the employee's side can be a risky endeavor.

How leaders frame issues will determine which facts will be considered, how information will be weighed, and ultimately how or if the problem will be solved. When frames of perception become frozen, people tend to stop listening for facts and prefer to accept information that fits preconceived notions.

So is framing undesirable job performance to someone's personal characteristics an attribute of poor leadership?

Not at all. Actually psychologists have found this phenomenon, known as fundamental attribution error (FAE), is quite common. Fundamental attribution error is a person's tendency to overestimate personal characteristics and underestimate the effect of the

situation or contextual factors when explaining behavior (Harvey, Town, & Yarkin, 1981). It is likely that attribution errors occur more frequently among school leaders. Research has found FAE occurs more often when people operate under demanding conditions (Manzoni, 2002). When leaders have limited time and their attention is constrained they are less likely to explore other possible explanations and settle on the first logical conclusion that enters their mind.

The key takeaway should be to avoid accepting the narratives of others or creating your own to explain why undesirable behaviors are occurring. Gather objective facts and use those to shape the narrative of how the behaviors are affecting the workplace and the overall mission of the district. This moves us to strategy #4.

4. Be Direct but Sincere

Because difficult conversations feel unsafe, many people have a natural tendency to tiptoe around what they view are sensitive issues or find alternative and sometimes underhanded ways to reach a predetermined conclusion. This is unwise for a couple of reasons.

1. It is awkward enough to sit down another professional and discuss performance problems with them, but when a leader attempts to discuss concerns but sugar coats or glosses over the message and the recipient is never of the message isn't sure if they are being coached or offered some friendly advice. When leaders are unclear or fail to clearly communicate the purpose of the conversation or desired change in behavior, the entire conversation may get completely lost on the employee. As a result, a follow up conversation will be far more difficult when the leader tries to explain they tried to make it clear during their last conversation, but they were afraid of hurting someone's feelings.

Attempting to be clever or trying to navigate a subordinate to a predetermined outcome during a difficult conversation can backfire as well. When

outcomes have already been determined before initial conversation begins (framing), leaders miss details that may point to larger issues within the organization (more on this later). Rather than tiptoeing around an issue or trying to use trickery, be direct.

Kerry Paterson, a renowned organizational behavior consultant, advises leaders to be direct and navigate difficult conversations using the STATE method.

Share your facts. Do not use opinions or emotionally charged words, rather state objective facts or behaviors that have been observed as the conversation begins.

Tell your story. Discuss how the undesired behavior affects the ability to lead the school and how it affects the mission of the school.

Ask others for their point of view or side of the story. Being direct does not mean the leader has all the answers. Remember leaders should be direct about objective facts, but they should always explore the root causes behind these behaviors. By asking others for their point of view leaders show humility and admit they don't have all the answers. Patterson reminds those she consults, if the leader's goal is to learn more about why the behavior is occurring and how to improve performance, rather than just being right, it is

essential to keep dialogue open by letting subordinates know their side of the story has value.

Talk tentatively. (Okay this point really should have been mentioned at the first part of the acronym but TSATE isn't a word so it would be harder to remember).

When leaders begin a conversation and share facts they have observed it can be easier to do so tentatively. For example, instead of saying,

“Jeff, I received a complaint from a parent regarding your grading methods and the lack of feedback their child is receiving. When I looked at some of the assignments you've graded recently I can see why the parent is concerned. Why aren't you taking the time to give the students feedback on their assignments?”

Try approaching the subject as though you don't have all the answers or assuming that the papers that have been reviewed are representative of every assignment that is sent home. Instead try a more tentative approach such as,

“Jeff, I received a complaint from a parent regarding your grading methods and the lack of feedback their child is receiving. I looked over a few papers you have

sent home recently and was wondering how often you provide specific feedback on your assignments?”

While the difference seems small, it is monumental in the mind of the teacher in the hot seat.

The first example says to the teacher, “I received and followed up on a complaint, I’m taking the parent’s side, and I don’t think you’re doing your job.” The second example says, “I’ve received a complaint from a parent, I followed up and have a few more questions and want to hear your side.”

The first example may get the point across, but it is also likely to damage a professional relationship. The second example still gets the point across, communicates a level of accountability, but says I give the professionals who work for me the benefit of the doubt until they prove otherwise. The final component of the STATE method is to test the assumptions that have been drawn and asking for the other side of the story.

Encourage Testing. Effective leaders do not pretend they have all the answers. When leaders encourage testing they are asking for the other side of the story or exploring mitigating factors.

The goal of difficult conversations should not be submission. Rather, the goal should be to have an honest and direct conversation that explores a performance concern and develops sincere methods to improve performance or remove roadblocks.

5. Establish a Mutual Purpose and Maintain Mutual Respect

Which is a more effective way of reaching a goal when depending on someone else? Finding a mutual purpose, or convincing another person to see things your way? In a difficult conversation the best way to show that the parties are working together to overcome the issue at hand is by establishing a mutual purpose. It's a Jedi trick that allows subordinates to see they are working with their supervisor to overcome the issue at hand. The alternative is to see the supervisor on one side of the argument and the subordinate on the other. If a teacher is always late, instead of resorting to, "There are a lot of other people who have a further drive than you and they get here on time."

Notice how the teacher is put on one side of the issue, while the superior is on the other.

Try putting the school leader and teacher on the same side. A better approach would still address the concern, but demonstrates a willingness to explore the issue with the teacher. For example, "You know our ultimate goal here at Pleasant View Elementary is to ensure student success through collaborative learning and teaching. The 30 minutes in the morning before students come in

the classroom is an important time for teachers to be able to collaborate before school. I know you have a lot going on in the mornings. How can we find a way to make sure you get here at the expected time to ensure any concerns about students or other pressing issues can be discussed prior to the beginning of the school day?"

Using this type of approach does not say "You have a problem and you need to fix it." It also does not say, "You have a problem, let me fix it." Rather, the approach used in the example above clearly communicates the undesired behavior, ties it to a mutual purpose or goal, then says think of some ways to solve the problem and I'm willing to work with you.

Establishing a mutual purpose is important, but it only works if the leader can maintain mutual respect. Imagine the same example above, being late for work, but this time let's assume it's a mother with a younger child who has had issues showing up to work on time. The principal has every right to use the approach of simply stating the expectation and suggesting the subsequent consequences, or they could show their humanity and empathize with the teacher before affirming the expectation and the impact. It is not

difficult to imagine which approach would be more effective.

When mutual respect is maintained leaders find it much easier to keep everyone on board as the building works together to achieve their mutual purpose.

6. Use Criteria not Co-Workers

When a staff member's behavior is in question the standard of performance should be criteria found within job descriptions, evaluations, policy, or any other objective criteria. The criteria should not be fellow co-workers.

Imagine a principal is having a difficult conversation with a veteran teacher who is dragging her heels on using new technology as a part of instruction. The principal's expectation is to adopt a new instructional technology initiative and she wants all teachers to begin implementing technology as they develop instructional units. Instead of dealing with the emotions and inhibitions that is preventing the veteran teacher from implementing technology the principal says, "Listen Sheila, you're a great teacher, but technology as a part of instruction is something everyone else has embraced. Emily, Megan, and Brett have all begun to use technology as they plan their lessons. I need you to get on board."

Two things are clear. One, Sheila didn't hear or won't remember her principal told her she was a great teacher. Why? The principal said "You are a great teacher, **but**."

The word “but” is a verbal eraser. Imagine a man saying to his wife, “You look great in that dress, but . . .”

You can guarantee his wife is listening very carefully to what is said after the word “but” and forgot the compliment that was given at the beginning of the sentence. If school leaders want to reinforce strengths, it is a better idea to provide that feedback after corrective statements, not before that all important conjunction “but.”

The second reality is: If the principal’s true desire is to get the teacher to begin using technology more often in instruction, she needs to clearly illustrate the benefits of the change and ensure adequate time and supports are available to build efficacy using a different type of instruction. After the teacher has been properly trained and has had an opportunity to apply her new skills under in a development setting expectations can be established according to an objective standard, such as a performance evaluation.

Giving a list of other teachers who have jumped on board early and are already using technology is unlikely to cause a change in behavior. In fact, comparing one teacher whose behaviors are in question, to other teachers who are believed to be the standard of performance, will only cause unneeded backlash from

the person in the hot seat. When a school leader tries to hold up peers as exemplars or standards that a teacher in question should strive to model, the teacher in question will likely rapidly begin listing the multiple faults in the exemplars (as they see them). Then, depending on what is revealed, the focus of the meeting is unlikely to return to the objective of the conversation, and likely to focus on exploring the accusations made or defending the other teachers.

When school leaders discuss performance concerns or needed areas of change they should stick with criteria found in job descriptions, evaluations, and organizational guidelines. Criteria are not personal or emotionally charged. Criteria are boring, but they are safe.

7. Keep the Focus on the District's Mission

What is the mission of the school district? What are the core values that guide the district or the school building? Many organizations draft a mission statement and hang a set of core values on the wall and expect those ideals to be upheld through osmosis when people walk past them every day.

Truly effective organizations develop their entire human resource practices around the mission of the organization. Mission driven organizations recruit, hire, train and develop, and evaluate based on behaviors that are aligned to the mission of the district. This idea is reinforced in Steven Covey's bestselling book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The second habit is "Begin with the End in Mind." When the military makes a plan for combat they follow the same principle. They focus on what they want to accomplish and then plan backwards, detailing every decision and event that will lead to the accomplishment of the objective.

When school districts are aligned to their mission and their purpose permeates through people practices in the district, difficult conversations are less likely to be personal. District recognition and rewards should be directly tied to desired behaviors. Difficult

conversations with staff should target occasions when a staff member's continued performance will lead the district further away from reaching their goals.

Imagine a principal at Lincoln High School has heard complaints from several parents and staff members that a particular teacher is not planning their lessons well. There are also complaints from staff members about the same teacher that movies are shown frequently in class that seems to provide little instructional value. Parents have also complained that the work coming home seems irrelevant to the course and their children are not being challenged. The mission of the district is to *"Create a Rigorous Learning Environment Where All Students are Challenged to Reach Their Maximum Learning Potential"*. How should this be handled in a mission driven district?

Once the principal has validated a few of the concerns they will likely decide to have a difficult conversation with the teacher. When the focus is on the district's mission here is what the conversation may sound like.

“Chris, have a seat please. How is this year going for you?”

(The principal should not have already framed the conversation as “Chris is a lazy teacher.” At this point principal should listen closely to the response and try to identify hidden factors that may be behind the behaviors that have led to this conversation).

“Listen, I’ve had some complaints about the relevancy of some of the lessons in your class and the lack of rigor or challenge to prepare your students for the next level in their lives. You know as a principal I must ensure the students here at Lincoln are receiving the level of education needed to challenge them and allow them to become successful in the future. I have looked into a few of these complaints and I have a few concerns as well. I have always been impressed by your dedication in the past. I was wondering . . . is there something else going on this year that is affecting the learning environment in your classroom?”

Notice a couple of things in the way the principal approached this conversation. First, each of the steps listed in the STATE method, found in strategy #4, are present in this approach.

Facts were stated, the principal told his story both how the behaviors are affecting him, the school, and the students. The principal has approached this topic tentatively and has encouraged testing asking for the point of view of the teacher- suggesting he doesn't have all the answers and there is another side to the issue.

The other notable point to mention is how the principal tied the teacher's behavior to the mission of the district. Look back at the principal's comments. He addressed the need for challenging lessons and tied the need to provide relevant lessons to the future of the students and the life paths they have before them. Additionally, the principal clearly communicated that a concern was brought to his attention and when he looked into it the concern was validated. Instead of approaching the topic too timidly and saying,

"I don't know if this is true, but . . ."

The principal made it clear that he had observed the concerns as well, but he also asked for the teacher's point of view. When difficult conversations are addressed in this manner they are far less personal.

Effective organizations make their mission part of their culture. Employees are indoctrinated in the mission upon being hired. The people that train and mentor

new hires exemplify behaviors that align to the mission of the district and they model how their decisions are filtered through the organization's mission. The ongoing training and development in districts should be aligned to its mission and provide the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure employees are equipped to carry out the behaviors needed to achieve the organizational mission.

When organizations are mission driven as a part of their culture, employees aren't taken back when they are coached for behaviors that don't align to the mission. Contrarily, they are likely to be surprised if nothing is said and the behaviors go unaddressed.

8. Embrace the Learning That Can Occur with Difficult Conversations

Who benefits from a difficult conversation with staff members? While the most obvious answer should be the students, a less obvious (and seldom pursued) answer may be the entire district.

Difficult conversations are the result of undesired behaviors among staff members. Patterns of undesired behaviors can occur across related behaviors, skill deficiencies, buildings, or many other factors. School districts need to explore these issues and develop the willingness to be critical of themselves when necessary. Learning organizations do this well. Typically school districts do not.

The nature and pace of school districts naturally prevent deeper level investigations of root causes behind employee performance issues. Manzoni, (2002) found when leaders have limited time and their attention is constrained they are less likely to explore other possible explanations and settle on the first logical conclusion that enters their mind. This finding was mentioned in strategy # 3, but it applies to the reality of school district operations. The example below illustrates this point a little better.

Leigh Ann has been a superintendent in a mid-sized school for five years. Over the last three years she has watched state standardized test scores fall, especially among lower income and ELL students.

During a district administrator's meeting she put every principal there in the hot seat, at the same time. In a small conference room she communicates her utter disappointment in the falling scores and demands the principals do more within their buildings to ensure teachers and specialized staff, such as Title I and ELL teachers are meeting the needs of these students. It is clearly understood by all in attendance that scores better improve by the next year.

The following week school a school principal in one of the district's elementary schools schedules what will become a difficult conversation with ELL and the Title I teachers. The principal shares what she sees as the facts; test scores for minority students have not improved in three years. By the way the message is delivered the story the two teachers hear is, "Scores are down and the consensus is you two need to pick up the slack." The ELL teachers are frustrated by the implications that are being made. One tries to explain why she thinks the students are struggling. She has a background from a previous career in analyzing data

and has begun to see some patterns too, but her attempt to speak out falls on deaf ears. The principal is delivering a message passed down all the way from the top. She doesn't feel the need to ask for their path, or point of view regarding student performance. The general perception among principals regarding this matter is, "I don't need excuses. I need results."

As a result the overall mood in the room, there is no tentative talk. Mutual respect flies out the window. The principal never asked herself the essential question before the conversation ever began, "What do I really want to happen as a result of this conversation and how would I go about this conversation if I really wanted those results?" Instead, the objective of the conversation seems to be - deliver the bad news and put the teachers on notice. That objective has been achieved with seemingly unimpressive results.

Both teachers leave the room furious with the way the situation was handled. They don't spend the evening thinking about how they can help increase performance. One is busy looking at open positions in nearby district. The other begins to seriously consider a career change.

Where was the break down in the situation above?
While it seems easy to point fingers at the principal for

the way the difficult conversation was handled, much of the blame rests at the feet of the superintendent. When provided with the information of the poor test results among ELL students no one thought to probe deeper as ask “why?” The principals were simply told to “fix it” and riding the wave of frustration generated by their leader they set out to find their sacrificial lambs.

This failure to dig deeper and explore root causes behind undesired outcomes was the focus of research for many years for Harvard Organizational Psychologist, Chris Argyris. He wrote extensively on the topic of what distinguished organizations that simply searched for the first apparent excuse from true learning organizations who systematically explore root causes to learn from mistakes and make better decisions for future actions.

One of the most important factors that distinguished organizations who sought to learn and improve from those who were simply looking for rationale or justification to problems was whether or not they subscribe to *single loop learning* or *double loop learning*. According to Argyris (1994), in an article titled *Good Communication That Blocks Learning*, learning occurs in two forms: single-loop and double loop. Argyris defined single loop learning as one-dimensional questions that elicit one dimensional answer. He likens

single loop learning to a thermostat which measures room temperature against a standard setting and turns the heating source or air conditioner on or off accordingly.

Double loop learning seeks more information and usually has several steps. Double loop learning turns the question back to the questioner. Using the example of a thermostat again, a double loop learning thermostat would first ask if the current setting is the most efficient based on many other factors. In addition the thermostat might query if the current heat or cooling source is the most effective means of achieving the most efficient room temperature. Double loop learning may also ask why the current setting was chosen, or if there is a door or window open.

The most essential point in double loop learning asks questions not only about objectives facts but it also the motives or reasons behind the facts.

Double loop learning is more creative and could lead to eventual changes in the rules, plans, strategies, or consequences initially related to the problem at hand. It involves critical reflection upon goals, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks, and strategies.

What is the connection between double loop learning and difficult conversations? If school districts want to transition to learning organizations, they have to be able to get to the heart of what causes desired and undesired behaviors and ensure the culture and systems within the district encourage desired behaviors and discourage undesired behaviors. To do this there are two very important connections that school leaders need to spend time to get right.

You have to go all the way back to the first strategy for difficult conversations to begin. Before difficult conversations ever begin ask yourself what your objective is. Learning organizations, those who care more about finding root causes and implement double loop learning practices that get to the root of an issue, establish objectives that may sound something like, “I want to know what allowed this to happen?” or “I want to determine if there is something about our culture or people practices that we need to address to solve a larger issue?”

Notice the nature of these questions. In a school that traditionally subscribes to single loop learning the objective (if there is one) is likely to sound something like, “Why doesn’t he follow our attendance policy and show up on time?” Another example might be, “Why

can't she manage her class?" These are not bad objectives by nature, if those who are asking the questions are willing to dig deeper and explore root causes. The difference is the way these objectives are framed.

Middle school science class can teach us a lot about how to utilize difficult conversations in double loop learning. When you state your objective it is like a hypothesis. Good science first attempts to nullify the hypothesis and then search for an alternative hypothesis. The null hypothesis is accepted only after alternative hypotheses have been tested and rejected. After a series of tests or experiments explore the educated guess the scientist should not state more than he or she knows to be true. In the double loop learning paragraph above the school leader would set out to prove the district has some type of responsibility for the undesired behavior. The facts revealed during the difficult conversation could either prove or disprove the hypothesis. Furthermore, in double loop learning the findings are usually tested again or explored deeper before conclusions are drawn and findings are shared.

In the example of the district that subscribes to single loop learning, the leader's objective, or in this case hypothesis, set out to prove the individual was at fault.

Typically in a single loop learning organization, once a leader can come across the first example that supports their theory, the inquiry stops and conclusions are drawn.

The second and equally important consideration between double loop learning and difficult conversations is setting the tone and structuring the difficult conversation in a way that allows new information to be shared.

If the leader's objective is to discover more about why undesired behaviors are occurring, the employee must feel like they can participate in the discussion. Strategies #2 and #3 as well as using the STATE method shared above provide room for discussion between the parties involved in a difficult conversation. If school leaders listen and explore the information shared during difficult conversations they begin the path to double loop learning. If the facts that are shared turn out to be disproved, the school leader can now disprove the undesired behavior is an organizational problem and address what the individual needs to do to improve their performance.

Chris Argyris, the Harvard researcher whose theories shaped single loop and double loop learning, believed that double loop learning is critical for learning

organizations and individuals that find themselves in rapidly changing and uncertain contexts. I can think of no other way to describe the nature of the educational industry. The future of education promises to evolve in a rapid and uncertain context. How school districts learn from the mistakes made at the individual and organizational level will influence how they adapt and grow. Difficult conversations provide an opportunity to move beyond fault finding and into fact finding. How those facts are used to shape the organization will be the true measure of whether schools can adapt to become the learning students depends on them to be.

9. Know When and How to Deliver Feedback

The purpose of providing feedback is to improve performance. This is true in post evaluation meetings and it remains true when preparing for difficult conversations. Knowing when to initiate feedback and how the feedback should be provided is dependent on many factors that school leaders should be familiar with. Shute (2008) likened feedback to a good murder, in that effective feedback requires three essential components:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| a. Motive | The employee needs feedback (due to actions or lack of actions) |
| b. Opportunity | The employee receives it in time to use the feedback |
| c. Means | The employee is able and willing to use the feedback |

The importance of a staff member's willingness to receive feedback is one of the most essential factors of difficult conversations. An important meta-analysis that

evaluated critical components of performance feedback found feedback can promote learning, thereby increasing performance, if received mindfully (Bangert-Drowns, 1991). To ensure the recipient of feedback is mindful, school leaders should strive to reduce perceived threats and create a perception of cooperative performance improvement.

Shute's research titled *Focus on Formative Feedback* compiled findings from over 100 research articles, books, conference proceedings, and dissertations on the topic of feedback. The study provides extensive feedback guidelines drawn from results of Shute's research. The following list is not an all-inclusive list from the study; rather it highlights the most relevant points that should be considered as school leaders deliver feedback to staff members.

Guidelines for Providing Formative Performance Feedback

1. Feedback to the employee should address specific features of his or her work in relation to the task, with suggestions on how to improve.
2. The feedback should describe the what, how, and why of a given problem.
3. Feedback should be delivered in small enough pieces so it is not overwhelming and discarded by the recipient. Presenting too much information at once may only result in cognitive overload.
4. If feedback is not specific and clear it can frustrate the recipient. Don't be ambiguous. Try to clearly link feedback to goals and performance standards.
5. Feedback from a trustworthy source will be considered more seriously than feedback from less known or untrusted sources. (This is an important consideration as many districts are adopting performance management interventions that are provided online. If the recipient of the does not know or trust those providing the content, they may not be open to the interventions provided).

6. Feedback should avoid comparisons with other people –directly or indirectly. In general, it is unadvisable to draw attention to “self” during the discussion. (As mentioned above, comparisons to others are likely to cause the recipient of feedback to become defensive and less accepting of feedback). Feedback that is too controlling or too critical has not been linked to significant performance improvement.

7. Conversely, and somewhat surprisingly, researchers suggest leaders should use praise sparingly. Research has found excessive praise feedback directs the recipients attention to “self,” which can distract from learning.

8. Feedback should indicate areas of strength while also providing information on how to improve.

If school leaders are required by state or district guidelines to use standardized test results when evaluating staff members they should not simply present student scores as the primary means of feedback. Research has found people whose feedback came in the forms of grades or scores only showed much lower learning gains than those who received comments regarding their performance.

9. When an employee is learning difficult new tasks (where difficult is relative to the employees current capabilities), it is better to use immediate feedback. This provides the employee with a safety net and can mitigate frustration. These findings are most appropriate for new employees or when training existing staff on unfamiliar new skills.

10. Adjust feedback to the ability level of the employee. High achieving and more motivated employees benefit more from feedback that prompts or cues them towards desired behaviors. For lower achieving performers, early support should be provided with direct links between current behaviors to desired behaviors. Novice people need positive feedback more often. On the flip side however, as people become more experienced and committed to a goal, negative feedback can actually help improve performance (*When delivered appropriately*).

Some final thoughts on delivering feedback. Leaders of organizations were put in their position because they were the most qualified, either internally or externally, to help carry out the mission of the district and hold those accountable whose actions fall outside of desired behaviors. Typically, school leaders use performance management tools to hold employees accountable to

the behaviors necessary to reach the overall mission of the organization. Within effective school districts leaders know *silence is consent*. That is to say, if undesired behaviors are occurring (that are obvious to most people) and no one says anything about it, it is the same thing as consent or permission to carry on with the same behaviors in the future.

If school leaders have tolerated an undesired behavior for a long time before having a difficult conversation, they should own up to that fact during the onset of the conversation. Leaders should let the person know the behaviors should have been addressed immediately and then begin determining the root cause and interventions needed to solve performance issues.

10. Use Bullhorns for Public Announcements, Not Difficult Conversations

Okay, it is unlikely principals are actually using an actual bullhorn to broadcast negative feedback to their entire staff, but what about when school leaders know the source of a problem, yet send a mass email regarding undesired behaviors that are occurring among one or two employees, to the entire school.

Another “bullhorn” tactic is waiting to deliver negative feedback (that is actually meant for a few specific people) during a staff or department level meeting.

School leaders who use this tactic, blasting out messages to groups that were actually intended for a few specific people, feel like their message sends a signal the intended person and to everyone else, that undesired behaviors will not be tolerated.

The bullhorn tactic is usually shrouded in cryptic innuendo that the leader feels is specific enough to be understood by the recipients. In the leaders mind, the intended recipients should hear the message loud and clear. More often, the intended target(s) never hear the message, while everyone else for whom the message

was not intended is left wondering what they have done to draw criticism from their supervisor.

The ineffectiveness of communicating by sending messages to others that seem clear in the mind of the presenter, but are lost on the intended audience was highlighted in a study that has become known as “Tappers” and “Listeners.” The study is most notable from its mention in the book *Made to Stick*, by Chip and Dan Heath. In the book the Heath brothers explain the study and offer their narrative as follows.

“In 1990, Elizabeth Newton earned a Ph.D. in psychology at Stanford by studying a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: “tappers” or “listeners.” Tappers received a list of twenty-five well-known songs, such as “Happy Birthday to You” and “The Star Spangled Banner.” Each tapper was asked to pick a song and tap out the rhythm to a listener (by knocking on a table). The listener’s job was to guess the song, based on the rhythm being tapped. (By the way, this experiment is fun to try at home if there’s a good “listener” candidate nearby.)

The listener’s job in this game is quite difficult. Over the course of Newton’s experiment, 120

songs were tapped out. Listeners guessed only 2.5 percent of the songs: 3 out of 120.

But here's what made the result worthy of a dissertation in psychology. Before the listeners guessed the name of the song, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would guess correctly. They predicted that the odds were 50 percent. The tappers got their message across 1 time in 40, but they thought they were getting their message across 1 time in 2. Why?

When a tapper taps, she is hearing the song in her head. Go ahead and try it for yourself — tap out "The Star-Spangled Banner." It's impossible to avoid hearing the tune in your head.

Meanwhile, the listeners can't hear that tune — all they can hear is a bunch of disconnected taps, like a kind of bizarre Morse Code.

In the experiment, tappers are flabbergasted at how hard the listeners seem to be working to pick up the tune. Isn't the song obvious? The tappers' expressions, when a listener guesses "Happy Birthday to You" for "The Star-Spangled Banner," are priceless: How could you be so stupid?

In the world of education the leader becomes a “tapper” when a bullhorn message is sent out via email that sounds something like this,

“I just wanted to send a quick reminder to everyone about a few housekeeping issues related to expectations. First, I’ve been in several classrooms recently and I am not seeing learning objectives for students on the boards in each room. Please make sure you have the learning objectives for each day’s lesson on the board. Second, it is imperative that we maintain good communication with our parents. Please make sure you are sending home weekly newsletters and return a parent’s call within 24 hours. Finally, I know the morning is a busy time for all of you, but we need all teachers to be in the commons area with their class by 7:50 each morning. I know most of you are doing what you are supposed to do. I just wanted to get everyone on the same page. Have a great day and let me know if you have any questions.”

The corrective behaviors listed in the bullhorn message are likely directed at a few specific individuals. If school leaders truly want to see behaviors changed, they should have individual conversations with staff members when these undesired behaviors occur, not

“tap” out a message and hope that the intended “listeners” catch the message.

Will there be occasions when a bullhorn message is the most appropriate method of dealing with an issue? Of course. There are times when a behavior is occurring the source of the problem is unknown. Maybe a door to the building was left unlocked over the weekend, or the teachers’ lounge copier settings keep getting changed and messing up the copies that others are trying to make.

When the source of the issue is unknown, managing by bullhorn may be the best way to approach the issue. However, when the source of the issue is known to seemingly everyone but the school leader and the “bullhorn” tactic is used, the message is likely lost.

The ability to effectively communicate with staff members to improve performance is one of the most critical skills needed for school leaders. Managing by bullhorn is seldom effective and will do little to improve building performance.

Conclusion

The pressure and expectations on school leaders have never been higher and the necessity of effective instruction has never been greater. These conditions will inevitably require difficult conversations to help shape staff member performance.

Difficult conversations with teachers and staff members are one of the most undesirable tasks associated with being a school leader, yet they can be the most transformative ways to explore deeper changes that can improve the school district as well as shape teachers into the professional educators that will be needed to help children succeed in the 21st century classroom.

With practice, willingness to listen, learn, and develop, school leaders can become more comfortable with difficult conversations. Doing so will create a culture that promotes honesty and encourages healthy dialogue that leads to better performance and ultimately more effective school districts.

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