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Stop Sabotaging Feedback

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How school leaders can get the most from giving and receiving feedback.

Few competencies are as important to school leaders as giving and receiving feedback—giving it skillfully to teachers, and receiving it skillfully from, well, everyone. Most educators agree that various forms of feedback are necessary and helpful. Even so, today's unending cascade of new directives governing who gets feedback, how frequently, and for what purpose can feel counterproductive.

These divergent views of feedback shouldn't surprise us. John Hattie¹ found that feedback is one of the top 10 influences on student achievement. And we can all recall times in our own lives when feedback has helped us change for the better, make it to the next level, or see ourselves more clearly. But we've all also experienced the opposite—times when feedback damaged our identity, triggered our anger, or felt threatening to our security and future.

That's the dichotomy school leaders face when giving or receiving feedback. It can feel like the very best use of our time—or a complete waste of it.

Feedback is fraught and complex because human relationships are fraught and complex. But school leaders can adopt a number of practices to make feedback less threatening and more productive.

Here, we explore two such ideas.

When *Giving* Feedback, Separate Coaching from Evaluation

Feedback that school leaders give to teachers serves several purposes. Two of the most important are evaluation and coaching. (A third purpose, appreciation, is also crucial, but that's a subject for another day.) Feedback for the purpose of evaluation helps us make choices about hiring, tenure, and resources; it provides teachers with a sense of where they stand and whether their job is secure.

Feedback for the purpose of coaching helps teachers improve their teaching practice.

Understand How Evaluation Undermines Coaching

Both of these forms of feedback are important, but evaluation hijacks our attention in a way that coaching does not. When the two kinds of feedback are given during roughly the same time period by the same person, evaluation can drown out even well-delivered, otherwise useful coaching.

Consider a study by Ruth Butler² that compared how scoring (evaluation) and comments (coaching) affected student achievement. Of three types of feedback given on students' papers, which do you think had the greatest impact on student progress: (1) a score, (2) comments, or (3) a score *and* comments?

When students in the study received one of these three types of feedback and then revised their work, those who had only received a score made no progress, whereas those who had received only comments improved about 30 percent. That outcome is not so surprising. But what may be surprising

is that students who had received both a score *and* comments also made no progress. The effect of giving students a score had wiped out the benefits of giving them comments. Because they were so concerned about the score, students simply did not process the comments. Of course, the same thing happens with adults; when we're evaluated and offered coaching at the same time, the effects of the coaching are lost.

In schools, we often conflate coaching and evaluation. Imagine, as principal, that you're having an end-of-year evaluation conversation with a teacher. You come prepared to discuss the lesson you observed. You start by noting that the teacher has successfully built rapport with his students, and then you move to some constructive coaching. You point out that his questioning could have been more rigorous if it had been higher-order and less teacher-centered, and you suggest some specific language the teacher could use next time. Then you give the teacher a formal evaluation of his performance, based partly on his use of questioning techniques (*effective*, *ineffective*, or some other rating from the prevailing rubric).

What will the teacher take away from this conversation? The teacher knows that at some point during the interaction, he'll be given a rating or score that might positively or negatively affect his future—or at least his self-esteem. As you skillfully share your coaching, the teacher isn't thinking, as we might hope, "How can I use this feedback to improve my questioning?" Instead, he's thinking, "What will my evaluation score be? Will it be fair? Does the principal even see what I've been contributing? What's going to happen if I don't get the evaluation I think I deserve? What will I say to my spouse?"

It's not that this teacher is neurotic; he's simply human. And chances are that when you observe him the next time, you'll find that his questioning skills haven't improved.

Find Ways to Disentangle the Two

The surest way to reduce the tension between evaluation and coaching is to separate the two. Ideally, evaluation and coaching should be provided at separate times, and coaching should be provided by someone other than the person tasked with evaluation. One K–5 school in the Bronx accomplishes this by having the principal evaluate the grade 3–5 teachers and coach the K–2 teachers while the assistant principal does the reverse. This strategy doesn't provide an impermeable barrier between the two types of feedback, but it's a smart solution. It allows the coaching conversation to be what it's intended to be: a space to brainstorm, learn, try on ideas, share vulnerabilities, and celebrate triumphs.

Even if your school is not able to have different people carry out coaching and evaluation, you should at least separate coaching and evaluation in *time*. Although evaluation conversations may take place once or twice a year, coaching should be ongoing and regular throughout the year. Coaching sessions should include no rubric scoring or other evaluations. If the school leader has significant coaching to offer a teacher at the end of the year, it should be given in a different meeting from the evaluation.

When Receiving Feedback, Take Charge of Your Own Learning

School leaders make an implicit assumption about feedback: that it's a skill that belongs to the feedback *giver*. And it's true that giving feedback is a skill, which we can do well or poorly. What leaders often miss, though, is that *receiving* feedback is also a skill that we can do well or poorly. In

addition to being good at giving feedback, effective leaders are also good at receiving it—whether it's from parents, students, teachers, or peers.

Receiving feedback is an important skill because even well-delivered, well-intentioned feedback will fall flat if the receiver doesn't hear it the way it's meant. The person getting the feedback has the power to decide whether it's on target, fair, or helpful, and to decide whether to use the feedback or dismiss it. This realization can be frustrating for the feedback giver. But for the feedback receiver, it can be liberating: "I can determine whether this feedback is helpful. I can take charge of my own learning."

Being good at receiving feedback doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with the feedback—rather, it means engaging in the conversation with an open mind and heart and then making a thoughtful choice about whether the feedback is useful. Here are two things school leaders should keep in mind when they're on the receiving end of feedback.

Don't Fixate on What's Wrong with the Feedback

One of the most common mistakes we make as feedback receivers is to listen for what's wrong with the feedback. In one sense, this impulse is perfectly reasonable; if feedback is off target, there's no sense in taking it. We have enough to worry about without trying to follow bad advice. The problem is, we can always find *something* in the feedback to quarrel with. To truly benefit from feedback, we also have to ask, "What's right or useful about this feedback?"

For example, suppose that you're a high school principal, and the superintendent sends you an e-mail saying that he's concerned that the percentage of your students passing the Algebra 2 state test has declined. Your internal reaction may be, "This superintendent has no idea of the extraordinary efforts we've been making on this front now that the Algebra 2 test has become Common Core-aligned. He was an English teacher with little background in math, and he should respect the efforts the math teachers have made."

Your reaction is understandable; you're feeling underappreciated and doubting that the superintendent's criticisms are fully informed. Those are important concerns, but you shouldn't dismiss the feedback on the basis of these reactions. You should not only ask what's wrong with the feedback, but also what might be right with it. For example, the superintendent may actually have uncovered a trend in student math performance that your school needs to address.

As the feedback receiver, you should try to clarify and understand the feedback. If you need some guidance from someone with a stronger math background to better understand the problem, you can pull that person into the discussion as well. You can apprise the superintendent of what is already being done to address the drop in test scores, and at the same time work to understand his concerns.

Dig Deeper

Understanding what another person means is not as simple as it seems. Imagine that you're an assistant principal, and the principal offers you this feedback: "I observed the 7th grade team meeting yesterday, and I'm not sure you're supervising your grade teams very well." You think, "That makes no sense. I'm doing a *great* job of supervising the grade teams! Maybe she's concerned that I wasn't at the meeting, but I purposely let team leaders run their meetings without me to empower them, and that's a good thing."

The problem with rejecting the feedback at this point is that you don't yet understand it. What does the principal mean when she says you are not "supervising" your grade teams well? Is she really concerned about your absence at the meeting? If so, what's her rationale? Perhaps she's satisfied with the responsibility you're giving grade-level team leaders, but she observed something at the meeting that makes her think you're not holding these leaders accountable. You can't figure out whether the feedback is on target and helpful until you understand it.

In addition to being vague, feedback in education often comes in the form of jargon. Suggestions like "make data-driven decisions," "ensure that teachers engage in inquiry cycles," and "use research-based instructional practices" are well intentioned, but they have little content on their own. When your supervisor gives you feedback that comes in the form of a vague label or that's couched in education jargon, suppress your knee-jerk impulse to dismiss it. Instead, take charge of your own learning. Ask the principal, "When you say my supervision isn't effective, what specifically are you concerned about? Help me understand what good supervision looks like to you and why, and I'll share my thinking as well." This will give you a clearer idea of the principal's expectations and enable the two of you to have a more meaningful discussion about successful supervision.

Be a Feedback Role Model

For school leaders, becoming good at giving and receiving feedback comes with an added benefit: There is no training you can offer, no teaching you can provide, that will improve the quality of feedback at your school as much as your own example.

When you give feedback, be explicit about separating evaluation and coaching so that the receiver can hear the coaching and act on it. When you receive feedback, really engage in the conversation; work to understand what the giver means and look for what's useful about the feedback. Be clear that you not only welcome feedback, you demand it. Be noisy about the importance of improving your school's feedback culture—for students, for teachers, for parents, and for yourself.

Readers' Stories

The Pivot

My mentor has taught me the art of the pivot—that in just changing my perspective on the lousiest day, scenario, meeting, or challenge, I can step away from the experience having learned something valuable. Do you know how helpful that has been? It has had the effect of donning a flack jacket, which has saved me untold heartache and misery. Instead of days of pity and self-doubt, I extract the lesson for future reference and move on.

—*Debra Beaupre, assistant principal, Hillsboro-Deering Elementary School, Hillsboro, New Hampshire*

Endnotes