

The Human Factor of Personnel Evaluation: Moving Away From “Shady” Evaluations to Straightforward Growth

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Pressures at Work

Principals often don't “say it like it is” in teacher evaluations. Even with all the recent attention to enhanced evaluation forms, protocols and online tools, a recent survey of several states showed that greater than 95% percent of teacher evaluations still have the teacher ranked as effective or highly effective...an unrealistic number in any profession. [NY Times; March 30, 2013]

A culture of “shadiness” frustrates other attempts at principal accountability, such as matching high stakes test results to teacher evaluation marks. In Atlanta, the pressure related to standardized testing contributed to the indictment of 35 educators for secretly changing students' incorrect answers on tests. A third grade teacher, who helped the prosecutors, spoke to the pressure, stating: “The cheating had been going on so long, we considered it part of our jobs.” [TIME; April 15, 2013]

Further, principals may feel that the repercussions of honest evaluations are simply too great and the immediate benefits too small. Strained working relationships, excessive time spent pursuing a plan of improvement, and no immediate upgrade of the questionable performance, all make telling the truth feel like a bad idea. Many say it is easier to pick your battles, give satisfactory ratings to all, and work off the record with those teachers with whom you think you can make a difference.

Forms are not the Answer

The challenge in having people be honest with one another in the evaluation process resides in the human factor, not in forms and procedures. Many appraisal instruments are standardized and have check boxes to rate the various performance measures, presumably making the process much more objective. However, the individuals delivering the feedback have vastly different communication skills and are constrained by other pressing responsibilities. Now the feedback may feel very subjective. If that wasn't daunting enough, evaluators have to confront their own very real fear of making mistakes and their fear of the reaction of others.

Many other current conditions create dread on both sides of the evaluation process. Scarcity of resources, top-down demands from state education departments, the weight of societal needs on schools, too many expectations and too little time, all take a daily

toll. In the midst of this maelstrom of demands, the site administrator is the one responsible for holding teachers accountable for student performance. It is not too hard to see the “why” of evaluations that are less than truthful.

The Forward Path of Continuous Communication

Principals' major operational tool is their working relationship with their staff. Given people's often-intense reaction to any feedback that is less than stellar, it is no surprise that principals are reluctant to rock the boat for fear of hampering those relationships. Further, site administrators often have little training in maintaining the necessary level of relatedness with people while providing constructive feedback on the performance of teachers, some of whom are already so stressed about their work that they are willing to cheat to get by.

Site administrators will brave the possible consequences of honest feedback only if by doing so they can make a significant difference to the education of the students and the operation of the entire school. They also need to know they are being fair. This type of environment is possible if the accountability system recognizes the reality of the human factor.

Continuous Constructive Communication

You can take your evaluation system, exactly as is, and immediately improve teacher and administrator performance by adding continuous constructive communication. Its four-part formula becomes the solid foundation of all verbal and written communication. Each part includes a communication practice and a human relations standard. This combination of addressing the mind and the heart of the teacher with every communication is essential to establish the relatedness needed to succeed in this high stress environment.

Continuous Communication Practice No. 1: Establish the specific facts.

In your communication include a description of specific, observed behaviors, without opinion. This provides an opportunity for the person to assess his or her own performance rather than resist the subjective judgment of the evaluator about that performance. Subjectivity dilutes the clarity of the feedback. If there were previous instances of similar behavior, point it out by listing prior occurrences. Beware of using words that convey disapproval and rejection of the person; they obscure the point of the communication.

Human Relations Standard No. 1: Build trust. In factual descriptions be sure that the behaviors described are current and not resurrected from past concerns that went unmentioned. Don't throw in the kitchen sink, but handle one issue at a time. Speak

directly to the performance only, not to anyone's character. Watch out for the use of adjectives or adverbs in any factual statement.

Continuous Communication Practice No. 2: Relay the impact of the observed behavior and its effects.

Craft your descriptions to show a cause-and-effect relationship between the specific facts and the consequences of those things happening. Highlighting this relationship serves to allow the person evaluated to self-correct their behavior based on understanding the “why” of the requested improvement. Further, the supervisor needs to be sure that the specific facts and effects of the impact are in balance, neither one under- or overstated compared to the other.

Human Relations Standard No. 2: Respect people. Rely on the belief that teachers want to do a great job. Trust that once they understand how a particular practice is not fulfilling that intention, they will alter their practice. In doing so, you are treating the person with dignity. At the same time, you are holding an individual accountable for their current performance. Further, as a caring professional, you will feel assured that what you are doing as an evaluator is based on a clear analysis, not a personal, unsubstantiated, opinion.

Continuous Communication Practice No. 3: Consider the atmosphere and put the individual's performance in context.

Factoring in variables within the environment that surround the teacher's performance makes this approach an open, humanistic system rather than simply a linear, rational system. These variables, which constitute the context that explains or allows us to find the meaning of the specific facts, may include health, family or school issues that are disrupting a person's ability to perform effectively. Some personal matters may be addressed orally rather than in writing.

Human Relations Standard No. 3: Understand the Whole Picture. Many different things that may be occurring in the personal and professional lives of staff may influence performance. Without room in the evaluation process to recognize and factor in those influences, there may be a lack of compassion for the affect certain variables are having on the individual's performance. This Human Relations Standard allows the performance to be viewed in perspective, by looking at the whole human being. Compassion is not a “free pass” or a license to underperform. Rather, it allows for the wisdom a broader perspective brings.

Continuous Communication Practice No. 4: Kickoff the Action for the next growth step.

This is a developmental process. The appropriate action step, to be taken by the supervisor or by the employee, is determined by an analysis of the appraisal measures using the three preceding communication practices and human relations standard. No one component determines the action. Rather, it is determined by what is appropriate considering the totality of the person, as you have come to understand him or her through these practices.

Human Relations Standard No. 4: Evolve and grow. In this approach the intent is that performance improvement can be accomplished easily, honestly and contemporaneously, allowing the person to evolve in his or her competency one step at a time. It is a system that grows people through communication and relationship, based on mutual respect and a commitment to the job.

By providing continuous, constructive communication to address performance, administrators not only gain confidence in knowing what to address and how to address it, they also become trusted leaders. Perhaps as importantly, they feel they are behaving consistently with their nature as educators and “growers” of people.

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