

The Human Dynamics of Personnel Evaluation

Overcoming the fear of giving honest feedback requires a commitment to constructive communication

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Excellence in education is our nation's call to arms, yet accountability for producing results is sending shock waves through the field. The demand for accountability is an explosive dynamic involving individual behavior and organizational systems.

School leaders willingly accept personal responsibility for their own actions, but they often are uncomfortable holding others accountable for performance results. They tend to focus on technological and curricular advances to improve education, while virtually ignoring the willingness of school staff to hold themselves and others accountable for the results that indicate quality education.

Further, we have ignored the culture and climate in which the "willingness" (or lack thereof) exists.

Would-be school reformers sometimes forget that the basic issue still comes down to how people get along and how they work with each other. Recognizing the human dynamics of the work and the school environment is at the heart of improving adult performance and, therefore, student achievement.

A Paradigm of Fear

For many in education, the words "accountability," "supervision" and "evaluation" are frightening. They imply having one's feet held to the fire for failure. These processes exist in a paradigm of fear and dread. Educators blame others and blame the circumstances for their lack of effectiveness rather than taking personal responsibility.

This phenomenon in human dynamics should not be seen as unique to teachers and administrators in education. It exists everywhere. We all have a tough time taking and giving criticism. We all have that very common fear of failure.

Even knowing this human frailty, we still design accountability systems that give little credence to the complexities of human behavior and reaction. Consider what one teacher recently communicated about her experience: "The advice, supervision and evaluation I have received have been demeaning and sarcastic. Not that the messages were wrong or inaccurate, but the style in which they were communicated and what was modeled were anything but collaborative, facilitative or 'partnerish.'" She added: "People joke about the fear factor. There's nothing funny about this fear. Until this embedded cultural norm changes, nothing else will."

Turning a Blind Eye

No matter how technically accurate and detailed an evaluation procedure may be, either in sources of data collection, narrative feedback or any other component, if supervisors won't use it, then we have accomplished nothing. Currently less than 1 percent of the permanent teaching staff nationwide receives anything other than the highest marks on the summary evaluation report.

This statistic is mirrored in virtually every school district in the United States and Canada. Yet behind closed doors teachers and school administrators acknowledge readily that 15 to 20 percent of permanent teachers are functioning at a less than satisfactory level. (These statistics were compiled from verbal responses of more than 75,000 administrators nationwide during training workshops I conducted.) What the disparate data point to is a human dynamics phenomenon screaming for attention.

Teachers and administrators are the unsung heroes of our society, tackling challenges that make the rest of the country shudder. To attribute this sad state to a lack of commitment or skill on the site administrator's part is to miss the influence of the paradigm of fear.

Pressures of Work

Current conditions are amplifying the intensity of the paradigm of dread and fear. In my travels during the past year working in schools with hundreds of administrators, teachers, union leaders and others, all have voiced similar concerns: scarcity of resources, top-down demands from governors and state education departments, the weight of societal needs on schools, far too many expectations, too little time, high stress and the flight of teachers and administrators from the profession.

In the midst of this maelstrom, the site administrator remains accountable for teacher and student performance. For these principals, the major operational tool is their working relationship with their staff. Given people's intense reaction to any feedback that is less than stellar, it is no surprise that principals are reluctant to rock the boat.

Site administrators have little, if any, training in the human dynamics that allow them to maintain the required level of relatedness while providing constructive feedback on the performance of permanent teachers. At the heart of the problem is an obscure condition coined "inarticulitis," characterized by paralysis of the portion of the psyche that governs straightforward communication. Its usual cause is fear of the reactions of others.

Why don't supervisors say it like it is? The repercussions are simply too great and the immediate benefits too small. Consider the lost working relationships, excessive time pursuing a plan of improvement and the tiny return on the investment given what it takes to remove one permanent teacher through the evaluation system. 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.

Those on the sidelines chastise the site administrator for not making effective use of the evaluation process. We never tackle the realities of school life. A persistent, intractable belief exists that a semiannual

or periodic evaluation system will provide useful feedback, even in the face of facts indicating that the ratings are grossly inflated.

We have not accounted for what makes people tick and have left our supervision and evaluation systems totally lacking in human dynamics. We perpetuate closed accountability systems that do not account for the chaos and complexity that is the world of human beings. As Stephanie Pace Marshall said in her 1995 article in *The School Administrator*, titled “The Vision, Meaning and Language of Educational Transformation:” “The unexamined application of Newtonian laws to social systems caused us to design ... linear system(s) ... when in fact human systems are complex, dynamic and organic.”

Site administrators will brave the reaction of others only if by doing so they can make a significant difference to the operation of the entire school. They also need to know they are being fair. This environment is possible if the accountability system recognizes the reality of human dynamics.

Constructive Communication

You can take your evaluation system exactly as is and immediately improve teacher and administrator performance by adding contemporaneous feedback through constructive communication.

Constructive communication can be incorporated into any supervision and evaluation process. It consists of a four-part, problem-solving formula to be used in all verbal and written communication. Each part includes a communication practice and a human relations standard. The formula is as follows:

* No. 1 Communication Practice: Establish the facts.

In your verbal or written communication regarding any issue, include a description of specific observed behaviors without opinion. This provides a mirror for the person to see his or her own performance reflected back rather than a judgment about that performance. If there is a pattern of behavior, prior occurrences should be mentioned after the current incident is described. Beware of using tinged words that convey disapproval and rejection and obscure the point of the communication.

An example: “Yesterday I visited your classroom for 15 minutes. You were lecturing on the American Civil War. While I was there you looked up two times from your notes and viewed only the first row of students. Of the 19 students in the room, only those 5 in the front row appeared to be paying attention. The remaining 14 students were engaged in off-task behaviors, such as drawing on the desks, painting fingernails and passing notes. You took no steps to draw the students’ attention to the lesson.”

Human Relations Standard: Build trust. In factual descriptions be sure that the behaviors relayed are current, 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. Lastly, be sure the teaching standard against which the performance is measured has been conveyed previously to avoid surprises.

*** No. 2 Communication Practice: Relay the impact of the observed behavior.**

The descriptions in the fact and impact sections usually show a cause-and-effect relationship between behavior and its outcomes. Highlighting this relationship serves to allow the staff member to self-correct behavior based on understanding the rationale of the requested behavior change. Further, the supervisor needs to be sure the facts and stated impact are in balance, neither one understated or overstated compared to the other.

An example: “As we’ve discussed, the American Civil War is an integral part of the state curriculum for 5th grade. Students must be prepared on this material. When student inattention is not addressed, it conveys a message that the material is not important.”

Human Relations Standard: Respect people. Rely on the belief that most school staff want to do a good job and 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 the consequences of behavior--not just that the behavior was performed but that it was effective. This requires the teacher to be respectful of student, family and community.

*** No. 3 Communication Practice: Put the individual’s behavior in context.**

Factoring in variables that may be involved in the employee’s performance makes this approach an open system rather than a closed system. These variables may extend into 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. The rule is: Always talk first, write second.

An example: “In staff meetings I’ve noticed you having difficulty reading the handouts and following what people are saying. This raises a question about your vision and hearing.”

Human Relations Standard: Generate cooperation. Staff members are influenced by many different things that may be occurring in their personal and professional lives. Without recognition of this dynamic, there could be a lack of compassion for the effect certain variables are having on the individual’s performance. This standard allows the performance to be viewed in perspective, looking at the whole human being.

*** No. 4 Communication Practice: Design the next growth step.**

Given this is a problem-solving formula, the appropriate action step to be taken by the supervisor is determined by an analysis of the three preceding communication practices. No one component determines the action. The next step is determined by processing the information gathered in all three communication practices. The action taken has a limitless range (assuming no legal or contractual violation) and is determined by what is appropriate considering the totality of the person before you.

An example: “I recommend that you have your vision and hearing checked. We then can determine whether they are a factor in your classroom management. Let’s meet next Thursday to discuss the results of your exams. Also, please bring to the meeting at least three strategies you have prepared for involving the whole class. We’ll review the strategies together and plan for future lessons.”

Human Relations Standard: Foster growth. In this approach the action is not considered part of progressive discipline or a formal plan for improvement. Rather, the intent is that correction can be accomplished easily and contemporaneously, allowing the person to evolve in his or her competency one small step at a time.

By giving administrators the tools to address performance and the corresponding human dynamics simultaneously, constructive communication releases the paralysis of inarticulitis. Administrators gain confidence in knowing what to address and how to address it and feel they are behaving consistently with their nature as educators of others.

This paradigm shift has taken place in the Academy School District in Colorado Springs, CO, which has used a program I named SUCCEED (System Using Constructive Communication for Enhancing Effectiveness and Development) for five years.

Kathie Crume, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, acknowledges a systemic change in Academy's culture of accountability. "The Academy School District has altered the entire way we do business, the way we communicate every day," Crume says. "The system is now in the fabric of our daily practices and has been a major contributing factor in maintaining our reputation for high academic results."

A Practical Application

Superintendents and directors of human resources frequently receive complaints from teachers who feel blindsided by a poor performance assessment. These teachers say, "Yes, I spoke with my principal, but I didn't know there was a concern." In such cases, it usually becomes apparent that the principal, uncomfortable and suffering from a bout of inarticulitis, has been hemming and hawing around the issue while trying to remain friendly and collegial. The substance of the communication can easily become lost in the hedging.

Crume relates one such experience with a teacher and principal in the Academy School District that illustrates the problem and how it was addressed using constructive communication.

A parent at Academy had complained that his child wasn't getting needed help from his 3rd-grade teacher. There had been similar complaints previously from other parents, which the principal and teacher had discussed. The teacher protested each time that she wasn't ignoring her students, yet the parent complaints continued.

The principal observed the teacher to establish the facts of what was occurring. Applying constructive communication, the principal mirrored back to the teacher what the teacher was doing. The principal described that when a student would say, "I need your help," the teacher would routinely reply, "What you need to do is sit down."

The teacher could not see herself and was unaware of her habitual way of interacting with the students and its suppressive effect. Even though the issue had been discussed previously, when put into the format of constructive communication the teacher found it easy to remediate the situation. She could see the behavior for herself and understand its detrimental effect.

The 3rd-grade teacher did not get defensive when her unconscious behavior was mirrored back to her. Behaving that way was not what she was committed to, and she readily made the shift. In addition, by resolving this situation she improved her relationship with the parents and became more effective.

With constructive communication, verbal and written, teachers at Academy no longer come to Crume claiming, “I didn’t know” about a performance problem. The administrators have a recognized channel of communication, which isn’t evaluative or disciplinary, to work effectively with their teachers for growth and development.

The Bad Apple Effect

We all have heard the folklore around tenured teacher dismissals. Educators tend to circulate horror stories about a minuscule number of teachers who are incapable of improvement and must be dismissed. These teachers often believe their performance is excellent so they demand from the school district and the teachers association their “day” in court.

The time (usually running over several years), effort and money required to remove a single teacher through the dismissal process is legendary and bone chilling. The long shadow cast by these legal efforts greatly influences administrators’ willingness to take on any teacher correction. Administrators typically develop formal improvement plans only in extreme circumstances such as these.

In reality, 99 percent of our teachers are capable of and willing to make performance corrections. To accomplish immediate turnaround, they need constructive feedback and instructional leadership from their principals. School districts must generate a new paradigm that replaces the fear and dread of honest communication.

There is no need to see only two approaches to modifying performance: an improvement plan or progressive discipline. Contemporaneous communication is a straightforward, clear and honest alternative and can be easily integrated into the supervision and evaluation process. Through constructive communication you promote trust, respect, cooperation and growth as your performance paradigm.

Accountability can encourage lifelong learning at all levels. This shift is achievable if approached with a willingness to grow and a dedication to communication that is ongoing, honest, constructive and inspired.

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