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THE SCHOOL Administrator

June 2007

Features
The Case of the Messy Desk

A better way to evaluate the superintendent is to use a constructive feedback system

By Mary Jo McGrath

All was right with Jim's world in July 2006. After five years as an assistant superintendent of personnel for a rural school district in Michigan and three years as its superintendent, he had just received a performance evaluation with high marks and a new three-year contract.

Imagine his surprise when two months later the school board called him into a closed session and presented him with anonymous concerns about his performance, ranging from a disorderly desk to unopened e-mail. On the spot he was ordered to respond immediately or resign. Jim refused and was placed on administrative leave. The seven-member elected school board in the 2,000-student district was going to be judge and jury in a due process hearing to decide Jim's fate.

Until January 2007, Jim had no clue what formal charges the board of education would use as a basis for its September decision. This was because it took the acting superintendent and the school district's attorney the four intervening months to do an after-the-fact investigation, sifting through thousands of documents to substantiate the anonymous concerns.

When offered a year's compensation to leave quietly, Jim drew the line and told the board to fire him or buy out his three-year deal at $103,960 per year. In February, they fired him, and in return he is suing the board.

During his eight years as a high-level administrator with the school district, Jim never received any notice of complaints about him or any warning that his job

was in jeopardy, and he never received any opportunity to correct perceived shortcomings. There was a definite failure to communicate and an apparent lack of commitment to provide feedback for continuous improvement.

While the identity of the superintendent has been altered, this scenario is derived from an actual case.

Mythology of Evaluation

Reflecting how important conducting detailed and specific evaluation is touted to be, in 1980 AASA and the National School Boards Association issued a joint statement calling for formal evaluation of superintendents, using standards crafted by their standing joint committee. Then the federal government jumped into the act and in 1994 the U.S. Department of Education funded a massive study of superintendent performance evaluation, conducted at Western Michigan University under the acronym CREATE, the Center for Research in Educational Accountability and Teacher Evaluation.

Although the study found 86 percent of school districts evaluated their superintendents, the study asserted that the districts were not being well served by their existing systems because they lacked data and detailed procedures. Model policies were constructed and disseminated to school districts nationwide with an attitude of "if we build it, they will come." But decades later, starting with the first call for standards-based superintendent evaluation in 1980, they still have not come.

Most school districts are not jumping on the bandwagon to upgrade their superintendent evaluation models, either to be data-driven or to include 360 degrees of input from the various constituencies. Few align with any of the various upgrades of the evaluation process and its related forms that have been proposed by the joint committee in 1980, by CREATE or by authors such as Michael DiPaola and James Stronge in their 2003 book, *The Superintendent Evaluation Handbook,* which AASA co-published.

Rather, the prevailing process used is often quite simple — and for the most part the superintendents like it that way. Forms are filled out by each school board member and sometimes summarized by the board chair. The board then discusses the results with the superintendent once a year during an executive session. Goals for the year to come are agreed upon, and everybody goes home. The process can take as little as 15 minutes from start to finish.

When asked, superintendents are likely to say they are proponents of evaluation, even their own. The superintendents often give the same three reasons: They want to know how their boards feel about the job they are doing; they want to get suggestions for growth in the areas the boards think are important; and they want to give their boards status reports on the projects that they are working on.

One superintendent of a large intermediate service district in a Western state said she really needed to learn how to brag during evaluation time. "Otherwise, they don't know what you've accomplished," she said. The superintendent bemoaned the fact her board did not know enough about all that already was going on in the region and was asking to get involved in additional initiatives. She mused that she needed to figure out a way for them to evaluate all the things she and the staff were engaged in so board members would appreciate the work being done.

Feedback	Measurement
Context dependent	One size fits all
Self-determined; the system chooses what to notice	Imposed; criteria are established externally.
Information accepted from anywhere	Information in fixed categories only
System creates own meaning	Meaning is predetermined
Newness, surprise are essential	Prediction, routine are valued
Focus on adaptability and growth	Focus on stability and control
Meaning evolves	Meaning remains static
System co-adapts	System adapts to the measures
Source: "What Do We Measure and Why? Questions About the Uses of Measurement," *Journal for Strategic Performance Measurement,* June 1999	

These purposes are not truly evaluative in nature and they may reflect a missing channel of communication in school systems. Superintendents need a recognized avenue to provide continuous systemic feedback to the board regarding progress being made, to dialogue regularly and to receive constructive feedback from the board on issues of importance, apart from any evaluation process.

Impeding Fears
Most believe professional evaluation is used primarily to justify either continuance or termination of employment with little or no consideration given to improvement. This belief contributes to an atmosphere of fear and distrust that can be damaging for board/superintendent relations. Jim's story is a clear example of this belief made real.

Evaluation is a sensitive process involving complex interpersonal relationships and is rife with the very human problems people have with communication. There is a prevailing fear of people's reaction to less-than-stellar evaluation, a fear so prevalent that I have given it a name, "Inarticulitis." It is the fear and dread of the reaction of others, resulting in an inability to state the problem clearly.

When surveyed, both superintendents and school board presidents believe evaluation is a negative process that deals with issues that are subjective and/or political in nature. The research substantiates their fears.

In the 1994 CREATE study, when asked about the major strengths of formal evaluation procedures, only 10 percent of New York state's superintendents and about 15 percent of the school board presidents thought evaluation procedures contributed to improving the performance of the superintendent and the district. Many superintendents are convinced good evaluations do not protect them from being blindsided by their boards for something seemingly inconsequential. As one superintendent put it: "It's not usually that you really made some big, bad mistake. You just made some dumb political mistake."

Fear is a major problem in the functioning and productivity of an organization. W. Edwards Deming, founding father of total quality management and the continuous improvement movement, identified 14 points for the attainment of quality. His eighth point begins: "Drive out fear."

How do we drive out fear? By focusing on systemic change and shared goals rather than formulaic evaluations, and by providing a continuous feedback loop rather than a hit-and-run approach.

An Alternative

The performance evaluation process is grounded in this premise: If we fix the people who do the job, by judging, assessing and critiquing what they are doing, we will improve how well the job is done. Therefore, the primary function of evaluation is to focus on the individual's performance.

This premise seems to make sense, but it does not work in reality. Most people would rather have root canal work than provide critical feedback to another.

Besides being highly discomforting, it is a questionable practice to pursue program quality and personal improvement by focusing on an individual's performance rather than the system in which they work. A system is defined as a set of interdependent elements forming a complex whole. Within a school district the system consists of a myriad of things: policies and procedures; budgets and staffing; long, medium and short-term plans; facilities and equipment; materials and supplies; established methods and curricula; the culture and environment; and other aspects of the organization.

According to Deming, the system that people work in and the interaction of people with that system may account for 90 to 95 percent of all performance. Unfortunately, in traditional performance appraisal, we don't ask "why" the system isn't working. We ask "who" is not getting the job done. We don't look for causes in the system. We look for culprits in the work force. This is a

"who-done-it" approach to problem solving.

DiPaola and Stronge say the superintendent's job is "an amalgam" of strategic planner, leader, cheerleader, organizational manager, fiscal officer, diplomat, politician and other equally important roles. "In essence, the superintendent personifies the aspirations and responsibilities of the entire organization," they wrote.

The relationship between the superintendent and the school board should be a role model for an effective approach to communication for quality and continuous improvement and a commitment to approaches that do not engender fear.

Communicate Often
The lifeblood of all systems is feedback. In the traditional sense as used within school districts, feedback is evaluative in nature, involves some sort of inspection, is defect driven and contains elements of blame. Systems theorists, such as Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline,* use the term feedback to describe the reciprocal or loop-back effect of a system's outputs upon the inputs. To truly engender growth, feedback must take the form of reflective information focused on learning, improving and enhancing the system and consequently the individual as well.

Margaret Wheatley, in *Leadership and the New Science,* helped popularize the idea of organizations functioning as learning systems. She and her associate Myron Kellner-Rogers wrote: "All life thrives on feedback and dies without it. We have to know what is going on around us, how our actions impact others, how the environment is changing, how we're changing. If we don't have access to this kind of information, we can't adapt or grow. Without feedback, we shrivel into routines and develop hard shells that keep newness out. We don't survive for long."

They provide an excellent chart of what distinguishes feedback aimed at improving the organizational system from feedback for evaluative measurement.

The power of quality feedback cannot be overestimated. It is the tipping point where little things can make a big difference, both locally and to the entire organizational system. You can start where you are with the smallest unit of evolutionary change, the needed feedback right in front of you, and transform the system by working on what needs to be done right now.

A Success Story
A constructive communication feedback system has been developed for school district administrators that facilitates the flow of information among individuals, either by managing the communication flow upstream to board members or downstream to principals and central-office directors. It provides continuous,

systemic feedback. This methodology is found in a program called SUCCEED with Communication, Supervision, Evaluation and Leadership.

The feedback system is in place in Jefferson School District 251, tucked away in the southeast corner of Idaho. Ron Tolman is the proud superintendent of the 18th largest school district in the state whose enrollment is growing at a rate of 5 percent or more a year. Tolman and his seven-member elected board live and breathe their vision statement, which reads: "We care about your students and believe in putting their education first. We are committed to doing all we can to help them reach their potential and realize their dreams."

When Tolman came to this Idaho school district three years ago from Wyoming, he brought with him his certification as a McGrath SUCCEED System practitioner and local instructor. He had gained his certification a couple of years before he made the move and had used the SUCCEED System primarily in his work supervising and evaluating employees.

As he started working with the Jefferson board, Tolman heard horror stories of meetings that had lasted up to five hours. He believed he could more effectively communicate to the board his recommendations and the rationale for them. Using the constructive communication feedback tool known as the McGrath FICA Standard, he devised a recommendation and motion form to use with all matters he brought before the board.

The FICA Standard tool is made up of four component processes that operate together to form a "system of thinking." The components logically analyze information and have a multitude of applications. They are: determining the facts; discussing any associated impacts of those facts; placing the identified facts and impacts in the context in which they arise; and, weighing the Facts, Impact and Context to arrive at the next appropriate Action, or FICA.

Tolman uses the tool during board meetings to bring clarity and specificity to the issues. It so effectively guides discussions that his board meetings have decreased in duration from five hours to two hours or less.

He also presents written recommendations to the school board in advance. Four to five days prior to each meeting, he provides board members with a succinct overview of each issue on the agenda. His format uses the McGrath FICA framework as follows:

The Superintendent's Recommendation for Action is:
1. (Facts) Background information, current facts and relevant history;
2. (Impact) Implications on budgeting, staffing, community;
3. (Context) Variables to consider, either anticipated or unanticipated; and
4. (Action) Rationale for recommendation, stating how he processed the above information to arrive at his recommendation.

Constructive Dealings

The board members have complimented Tolman on his communication skills and thanked him for keeping the advanced briefing so on-point and clear. The superintendent is pleased with the dialogue that takes place at the meetings and the great questions members have when they arrive. It is clear to him they have done their homework.

Tolman implements other SUCCEED System principles for constructive communication feedback in his speaking and writing. He avoids the use of subjective adjectives and personal opinions, keeping the tone professional and nonjudgmental, setting expectations clearly, determining measurable goals and timelines and providing information in a timely fashion.

He also is a trained SUCCEED instructor for his school district. While he has not formally trained his board to use the McGrath FICA tool to give him feedback, board members have naturally taken up use of the system under his leadership. His next step will be to engage them in use of the complete system.

Tolman still receives an annual evaluation, including a summary statement. He and the board meet to discuss the performance summary and set goals for the following year. During those discussions Tolman makes use of the McGrath FICA tool to ensure he has a complete understanding of what the board wants of him. Because all issues are documented and discussed in an ongoing, timely fashion, there are no surprises.

While the system is simple, its application is not. The implementation of the constructive communication feedback system calls for what researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning call "second order change"; that which is a drastic, dramatic change in an educational system.

A New Adventure

It takes courage to try something new, especially in today's world of "leadership by adjective." One has to suspend disbelief that something simple could actually make a profound difference.

It takes courage to lead the way for the people within your organization to give up blaming individuals for what may be system error.

It takes courage to give up the institutional attachment to evaluation as the solution to quality issues.

It takes courage to build a system of constructive communication feedback that nourishes the organization and the individual, but it is an adventure worth embarking on.

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