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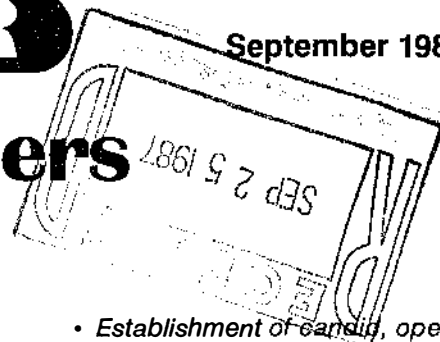
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Evaluating Teachers

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According to a recent survey,* principals say that the single most important aspect of their job is teacher evaluation. That being so, it is not surprising that a large body of knowledge has been accumulated regarding teacher appraisal. However, differences continue to exist among leading authorities as to various possible strategies and approaches. What follows is an attempt to synthesize and highlight the major tenets of the evaluative process, with an emphasis on the most practical aspects.

An Overview

Just about everyone agrees that the primary purposes for evaluating teacher performance continue to be to seek to improve instruction and to establish a basis for personnel decisions. The latter, in the harshest aspects becomes a question of retention or dismissal, and for purposes of defense against possible litigation, it is imperative that the teacher be so informed.

Within the primary purposes of teacher evaluation, the evaluation should at a minimum provide the following:

- *An appraisal of strengths and weaknesses.* Feedback in this area would likely concentrate on such areas as (1) classroom management and organization, (2) instructional strategies, (3) presentation of subject matter, and (4) learning environment, with each of these domains being considered in appropriate breadth and depth.

- *Communication that encourages improved performance.* Both verbal and nonverbal communication from the principal should convey *constructive* remarks intended to be informational, directional, and motivational. Any hope for improved performance hinges upon how constructively the principal is able to deliver the message and how positively it is received by the teacher.

- *Identification of inservice training, staff development, and other professional growth activities needed to overcome identified deficiencies.* Far too often in evaluative sessions, principals may identify deficiencies in one skill or another but suggest no specific remediation or other assistance. For improved job performance to occur, the principal must be able to point to specific, available help, and then leave no stone unturned in seeing to it that the teacher actually receives this help.

- *Establishment of caring, open communication between the principal and the teacher.* There should be a free exchange of ideas between the principal and the teacher, with the appraisal conference serving as one means of validating that the principal is a straightforward, available, acceptant, and caring person. To create such a perception is to enhance teacher morale and to assure a positive evaluation experience.

- *A basis for administrative decisions.* In time, every principal is called upon to make decisions regarding retention and dismissal. So critical a decision regarding a person's professional career deserves careful, deliberate consideration and is a subject addressed at length in many books, monographs, and professional journals.

The Evaluation Cycle

Four rather distinct steps are a part of the teacher performance evaluation cycle. Each plays a vital role, and none may be skipped over lightly. They are:

1. *Establishing the rules.* It is absolutely essential that the building principal carefully plan all the details

*See "What Makes a Principal Tick?" by Jim Sweeney and Bob Vittengli in *Principal*, January 1987.

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that will be involved in evaluating each individual teacher. As with a well-designed lesson plan, the principal must clearly address the objectives to be achieved, the activities that will assure the accomplishment of those objectives, the materials needed to complement and enhance the activities, and a method or procedure by which the teacher evaluation process itself can be evaluated.

Establishing the rules for teacher evaluation includes determining *who* will do the classroom evaluation (principal, assistant principal, etc.), the *purpose* of the classroom visits, the *number* of classroom visits to be expected, whether visits are *planned, unannounced, or on invitation*, and whether there will be a *follow-up conference* or only *written feedback*. In some districts, many of these decisions have been taken out of the principal's hands by state-mandated legislation. A case in point is the state of Texas, where legislation clearly spells out who is to evaluate, the number of formal classroom visits to be made, the nature of the conferencing process, etc. In other places, local districts have established guidelines to which the principal is expected to adhere. It is of course essential that the principal become thoroughly informed about such limitations—state and local—and the procedures and standards they call for.

2. *Orienting the teacher.* The essence of all effective human relations is clear communication, and clear communication is nowhere more important in teacher-principal relationships than in orienting teachers to the mechanics of the process of teacher evaluation. A typical approach is to do so in a general faculty meeting at the beginning of the academic year. If an inordinately large faculty is involved, with the possibility that the message will get lost or be diluted, many principals have found it more desirable and effective to meet with smaller groups—to set up sessions, for

example, on a grade level basis. The basic concept is to reduce the number of participants to a point that permits an open, free discussion, thus assuring that every teacher has the opportunity for two-way communication with the building principal before the evaluative process begins.

Undergirding the verbal orienta-

Write things down: It is important to have a full record of what was said.

tion process should be written communication. While verbal orientation is both necessary and desirable, the spoken word is often quickly forgotten. It is thus important to have handouts that highlight the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the overall evaluation process as conducted at that school. In addition, in the unhappy event that litigation were to occur, written documents are far better evidence than one's recollection of what was allegedly explained.

3. *Formative evaluation (data gathering).* The third step in the teacher performance evaluation cycle is the actual classroom visitation. A number of crucial questions must be answered in the planning stage, long before the principal steps into the classroom for the first formal visit. Even if the number of classroom visitations has been mandated by legislation or district policy, the wise principal recognizes the importance of building in some flexibility. It is far better to inform the general faculty that

there will be one to three formal visits per faculty member and then find that time constraints prevent such an objective from being accomplished. In actuality, teachers are much like their own students; that is, some need more attention and instruction than others. Therefore, the astute principal will maximize his visits to those needing the most help, and minimize his visits to the strongest teachers. In any case, it is most important to understand that *every* teacher (including the most outstanding) should be, and deserves to be, visited and formally evaluated at least once a year. Even positive value judgments about a teacher's instruction made by a principal who did not feel it necessary to visit is still likely to elicit a response such as, "How does he know? He didn't see me teach." Negative attitudes often develop when teachers receive the idea that they are not worthy of even a single classroom visit during the school year. Teacher morale is at stake throughout the entire evaluation process and should be continuously addressed.

A second part of the data gathering is to determine the exact purpose for visiting the classroom, thereby determining the length of time necessary to be in the classroom. For example, informal observation or a previous visit may have established that a particular teacher's problems occur at the beginning of the class period. The teacher has had difficulty in getting students on task and the principal wants to observe whether the teacher has made any progress in solving this problem. In another case a teacher had difficulty in bringing off closure and then a smooth transition to new ideas, concepts, or materials. In still a third case, a teacher seems unable to bring the class period to a clear, definite end. Drop-in visitations to these three teachers obviously should be made at different parts of the class period. In short, the purpose for being in the classroom largely dictates the time to arrive and the

amount of time to be spent there.

A third factor in classroom visitations is knowing what to observe. It is essential that principals have with them a checklist that reflects items that are relevant to the evaluation of the particular teacher involved. A basic list might well include classroom management and organization, instructional strategies, presentation of subject matter, and the learning environment that has been created.

It is further necessary that notes be taken and recorded during the observation phase at exactly that moment. Principals who have attempted to "remember" what they saw and heard and "write the evaluation when they get back to the office" have jeopardized both reliability and validity. Realistically, the chances of principals going directly to their office to record their observations are poor, given the multitude of interruptions that mark a typical day.

A final important part of the formal classroom visitation process for the principal is to determine if such visits should be planned in advance with the teacher or unannounced. While there may be some dissenters, authorities in teacher evaluation endorse both kinds of visits, particularly for probationary teachers. One school of thought regarding the planned visit is what one would expect—principals should see teachers at their best. Obviously, most teachers can be expected to try to put their best foot forward in such instances. And it makes infinite sense to most principals that they see the very best teaching the teacher is capable of offering. The planned visit should insure that.

On the other hand, since planned visits could result in a contrived, artificial classroom performance, other authorities feel the unannounced visit would provide the principal a more valid experience—an insight into a more typical, everyday classroom performance. And still other authorities suggest both scheduled and unannounced formal visits.

4. *Summative evaluation (judgmental in nature)*. Particularly in states where legislation mandates matters that are to be considered in evaluating teachers, the feedback from classroom visitations is sometimes delivered in a form to be completed by the principal. Forms can be useful, but normally they are not

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enough; they lack impact. A far more impressive means of communicating feedback is the principal/teacher conference. In this kind of professional relationship, the spoken word has far greater force than the written word, and in any case a conference provides the opportunity for constructive give and take and for the principal to make sure that the teacher is not confused or has questions.

The goal of the session should be both to give information and get information, as one means of building a cooperative attitude on the part of the teacher. Note that while the principal may have the most information to impart, it is important that the teacher be given ample opportunity to convey facts and express opinions. There may be significant variables that influenced the teacher's performance during the visitation—matters of which the principal may have been completely unaware: some personal problems, perhaps, or possibly some especially difficult students in this particular class.

The principal should be sure that the conference takes place as soon as possible after the classroom visit, preferably within 72 hours. Teachers are often anxious about such conferences, and besides alleviating anxiety, a prompt follow-up assures that the recall level of both participants has not begun to fade.

Additionally, it is essential that the counseling session be private and free of interruptions. Nothing can cast a pall over the conference more quickly than for the principal to interrupt the session to accept telephone calls or take time out to confer with someone or give instructions to the secretary. Such interruptions convey a message that the principal feels that the conference, and the teacher, are not really important.

The more carefully the conference/counseling session has been planned, the more effective it is likely to be. Presumably the plan will cover such matters as the following:

1. Basic information, including the teacher's name and the class being observed, plus relevant personal data about the teacher (background, years taught, etc.).
2. Objectives, including particular skills and strategies to be alert to.
3. Timing, including making sure the teacher has been notified, and determining what written materials or information the principal or the teacher should bring to the conference.
4. Opening the conference: Putting the teacher at ease, summarizing the nature and purposes of the conference, noting any questions that need to be cleared up before the conference swings into gear.
5. Action: Give and take between teacher and principal on the latter's observations; suggestions by the principal; agreement on procedures or techniques by which the teacher will seek to improve performance.
6. Closing: Summary of what has been discussed; reiteration of next steps.

Such planning not only ensures that the conference will stay on track

STREAMLINED SEMINAR

and respond to the teacher's needs, but also gives the principal confidence and assurance by providing the session with a clear structure and purpose.

A synthesis of the findings of research on conducting teacher evaluations and conferences would suggest the following ten commandments:

1. Plan for the counseling session.
 2. Conduct the session in a quiet, private place.
 3. Make use of all pertinent facts.
 4. *Listen* to the teacher.
 5. Remain calm regardless of the teacher's attitude.
 6. Fit all comments and suggestions to the specific needs of this particular teacher.
- Focus on actions—do not appear

to be attacking the teacher personally.

8. Offer encouragement.
9. Leave the teacher anxious to improve.
10. Plan for any needed follow-up interviews.

Summing up, evaluating teacher performance remains one of the most difficult tasks that building principals encounter. Drawing upon the major theory and research in vogue today, it is first of all clear that the evaluation cycle has four cornerstones—establishing roles, orienting the teacher, making a formative evaluation, and offering a summative evaluation. Each is critically important. Indeed, the goals of teacher evaluation—to improve teaching effectiveness and make personal decisions—are dependent on those four variables. A fifth and final variable that needs to be understood by all principals is that teacher response to an evaluation of their instruction will be directly related to their perceived relationship with the person conducting the observation—e.g., the principal. In short, the principal's professional and personal rapport with the teacher will be of crucial importance in influencing the teacher toward behavioral changes necessary

to improve instruction. Teachers are not likely to respond favorably to suggestions for change that emanate from someone they do not respect.

Such teacher reactions and attitudes demonstrate how clearly proficiency in human relations relates to being a proficient principal. In fact, teacher evaluation represents one of the most rigid tests of a principal's ability to relate to others. As research has long since demonstrated, effective schools come about through the leadership of effective principals—leadership based on the establishment of a positive relationship with the school's staff. In no aspect of the principal's job is a positive relationship important than in teacher evaluation.

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