

Empowering Educators through Evaluation: Ten Tips for Administrators

By Lisa Van Gemert

The story is told that during the 19th century, two shoe salesmen left Manchester, England, and traveled to a remote, undeveloped location to see if they could sell shoes. One wrote back a telegram that read, “SITUATION HOPELESS STOP THEY DON’T WEAR SHOES.” The other salesman wrote back, “GLORIOUS OPPORTUNITY STOP NO ONE HAS SHOES.” The situations were identical, yet the reactions were completely different. This same dynamic often exists with educator appraisal, with some seeing it as an instrument used against teachers in which administrators serve as judge and jury in determining the professional achievement and performance of the teachers on their campuses. This dynamic is unhealthy and unnecessary, and rarely desired by the administrators. Ten simple steps will turn teacher appraisal into an instrument of power for educators, improving instruction along the way.

Tip 1: Change the Dynamic

First, administrators must change the dynamic. Rather than arbiters, they must see themselves as guides, and the teachers must see it that way, too. The instrument should be teacher-driven, not administrator imposed. This can happen when administrators invite teachers to work in tandem to plan the goals of the appraisal for the year, identifying two or three target areas for development. Teaching is no different than many other things in life, and it is often easiest to see what change or growth needs to occur when looking at the classroom from a different perspective. Unfortunately, as with many other aspects of life, it is hard to hear that one must make changes. The old cliché is true: a man convinced against his will is not convinced, and a teacher who has appraisal used as an instrument of correction rather than growth will remain unconvinced, preventing true and effective change. To change this dynamic requires expenditure of our most scarce resource: time. Administrators must make time to have open dialogue with teachers in a non-threatening environment, conveying the idea that the administrator is there to support the teacher’s own professional growth and sharing the fundamental idea that the appraisal is for the teacher, not the teacher for the appraisal.

Tip 2: Manage the Portfolio

Financial planners help clients to manage investment portfolios, and

this relationship is an effective metaphor for administrators, who can and should help educators to manage professional portfolios. Too often, the formal observation and walk-throughs are viewed by teachers as their only opportunities to display their skills, when most of what administrators are trying to appraise happens behind the scenes. This adds tension to the situation, actually decreasing the odds that the teacher’s true abilities will be displayed. An educator who knows that observation is one part of a larger demonstration may feel more confident and less threatened by the presence of administrators in the classroom. A portfolio enables educators to gather, over a long period of time, including the summer, artifacts that demonstrate professional achievement.

The portfolio should be set up to reflect the organization of the appraisal instrument, enabling the administrator to quickly gauge the level of proficiency in any given domain. For example, if the district uses the PDAS instrument, a teacher could use a four-inch binder with sections for each of the eight domains. Tabbed dividers within the eight sections can provide archival space for each of the 51 criteria, with page protectors in each area to hold documents. Educators then place copies of documents or other artifacts responsive to each of those criteria in the appropriate section throughout the year. These may be as simple as sticky notes or as complex as complete lesson plans or copies of letters sent home.

For example, in the PDAS instrument (PDAS is used here for purposes of illustration, yet the process is identical in any instrument) Domain V (b) is *Professional Development - The teacher correlates professional development activities with assigned subject content and the varied needs of students*. Most teachers simply provide proof of attendance. However, a portfolio allows teachers to include copies of articles read online, a short list of Twitter hashtags followed, notes on webinars attended, and reflections on how those opportunities dovetailed with the content area and student clientele.

Tip 3: Select, Don’t Impose, Goals

Appraisal instruments typically address far more criteria than any one educator could possibly improve upon in a single year. With the supervising administrator, teachers should be invited to select two or three areas to concentrate on for the upcoming year. Often, we

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Tip 5: Play Fair with Formal Observations

Everyone is familiar with the Golden Rule, yet the Platinum Rule – do unto others as *they* would have done to them – is the correct one for formal observations. Exercises in diplomacy as much as administration, formal observations create networks in even the most excellent and veteran of teachers. The evaluator's ability to lessen anxiety increases the chances for a valid and complete evaluation. To do this, take time to review the teacher's portfolio (see Tip 2) and identify what still needs to be, creating a dynamic in which the administrator is facilitating the teacher to achieve his/her own goals. Share this in an advance conversation with the teacher and follow up with a casual note, making sure to align these with the goals set for the year (see Tip 3). Invite the teacher to share with you what strengths he/she is planning to demonstrate so that you can look for those. Making a voice recording with the teacher's permission will enable the administrator to take fewer notes during the observation, thus allowing for more visual contact with the teacher. Administrators should not hesitate to smile, nod encouragingly and appear relaxed during the evaluation. The goal should be for the teacher to see the formal observation as a chance to shine, rather than a chance to be judged and found lacking.

Tip 6: Seek Out Quality Professional Development Experiences for Teachers

Virtually every profession has a continuing education component, and education is no different. As with goals, self-determination is essential because the most effective, research-based professional development opportunity is useless if it feels forced. Some profes-

Tip 4: Understand the Walk Through's Appropriate Audience

Last year at a large suburban high school, a science teacher had six walk throughs in four days near the end of the appraisal timeline after six months without a single one because campus administrators had not made time for them through the course of the year. This practice, unfortunately not isolated, defeats the purpose of the walk through and sabotages the administrator's legitimacy with the faculty. Fortunately, the cannon of literature on effective walk throughs is large and growing, so no administrator need wonder as to best practices in this regard. A key idea regarding the walk through was explained by Richardson (2001) and remains true today – it is a strategy for providing a school, not an individual teacher, with feedback about what it's doing or not doing" (p. 2).

Occasionally, the walk through is used (or is seen) as a reductionist weapon against teachers. A far better approach is holism, the idea that complex systems are best viewed in their entirety, rather than oversimplified into too-small parts that lose the inherent quality of the overall system. Faculty should be made aware of the campus goals administrators are hoping to see in the walk throughs, making it clear that walk throughs are as much or more an instrument of administrator effectiveness as teacher efficacy. If suspicion already exists on a campus regarding the walk through, one way administrators can demonstrate that they are looking for campus achievement rather than trying to "get" teachers is to have the teacher unidentified-

insistently select the domains that are troubling the teacher (or the administrator). They should be part of the process, of course. However, domains that are areas of strength should be included as well in order to lessen discouragement and optimize growth. If all the educator is expected to focus on for the year is weakness, strengths may become weakness. Rath (2007) explains "people have several times more potential for growth when they invest energy in developing their strengths instead of correcting their deficiencies" (p. i). Sagor (2003) agrees that "to be truly motivated, all teachers must be given regular opportunities to validate the positive effect that their work is having on their students' lives" (p. 6).

If administrators want teachers to perform at the highest levels, the teachers must be able to set their own goals and focus on strengths as well as weaknesses. Rath (2007) found that people whose managers focused on weaknesses rather than strengths were far more likely to be disengaged by a very large margin – 22 percent to 1 percent (p. iv). Setting their own goals and allowing those goals to include the development of areas of strength can lead to optimal experience. According to Wright (2011), "for a person to realize optimal experience there must be a sense of intrinsic motivation, freedom of choice, and personal investment in the outcome" (p. 44). Locke and Latham agree, arguing that "assigning hard goals may not be effective when people view those goals as threatening" (p. 266). If every goal for the year is based upon perceived failures or shortcomings on a previous appraisal, it would be difficult if not impossible for an educator not to perceive it as threatening, thus lessening its efficacy. Thus, ideally an administrator would begin the conversation by identifying areas of strength and interest, inviting the teacher to set a goal within those areas, and then suggest that a goal be developed to address a single area of concern.



sions lure their attendees with conferences in exotic locales, featuring exhibit halls with swag flowing like water. Contrast that with the professional development offered teachers. Frequently attendance is forced, the locale is rarely exotic, and the only swag is typically additional paperwork.

Fortunately, the classroom is not the only thing that is flipping. Professional development opportunities are no longer restricted to district-provided seminars. Instead, teachers and administrators have a plethora of options to ensure that educators have access to appropriate, responsive and effective professional development. If an administrator is in tune with the professional interests of the faculty and will keep abreast of opportunities beyond the norm, the teacher will be likely to see the administrator as someone who legitimately desires to develop the talent of the teacher, rather than force feed one-size-fits-all training. As with virtually everything, people are more willing to do the have-to's when there is opportunity for want-to's as well.

Professional development is available online, through webinars (often free), book discussion groups, blog or website training, TED talks and more. Creating a menu of opportunities rather than a set meal will help educators be open to the experience. Effective administrators will share training opportunities, bring in quality facilitators and have humane professional development as a core element of campus instruction and evaluation.

Tip 7: Use the Technology and Share the Wealth
Luddites have no place in the current education climate, so administrators must find and share appropriate technology with their campuses. Inviting the teachers to share what they have found helps make educators feel included in the process, as well as giving the opportunity to beef up their portfolios. Following a couple of teaching technology blogs (such as edgalaxy.com) or Pinterest boards (<http://pinterest.com/coolcatteacher/teaching-ideas-and-apps/>) and sharing what they find on their own blogs, websites or simply through email keeps administrators abreast of trends and helps teachers see them as a source of quality information. Administrators do not need to be tech-savvy themselves in order to share wonderful ideas as long as they tap into the resources and ideas shared by those who are.

Tip 8: Look at the Business Side of Things
Although the business world is not an exact parallel of education, educators could benefit from many of the tenets and experiences shared in business journals and books. Sources of information regarding best practices need not be limited to those directed at education. Following blogs or reading publications (see <http://100bestbiz.com/more-on-the-100-best/> for a list of wonderful business books) that are not education-focused gives educators an edge and ability to see the broader picture of the intellectual environment. Frequently, stress points for teachers have parallels in the business world (communication, reaching your audience and time management are just a few), and helping faculty find quality material from outside the education field creates an even more professional atmosphere on campus.

Tip 9: Incorporate Humor
Humor does not mean that the campus must morph into a comedy club. It simply means that administrators invite teachers and

students to enjoy themselves during their time at school. Whether it is a formal program such as Fish for Schools (www.charthouse.com) or a more casual individual effort such as Al Hemmle roller skating around 540,000-square-foot Midlothian High School, administrators set the tone of the school. Alfred Mercier said, "What we learn with pleasure we never forget," and this is nowhere more true than on a campus.

Tip 10: Put Some Skin in the Game

Administrators can take a page from the school librarian's handbook and continue to call and view themselves as teachers. An impactful way to do this is to have teachers and students see you teaching. Even a short lesson shows teachers that you are with them, and it can positively impact the way students see administrators as well. Often, administrators struggle to find adequate time to get to know the students who are not in need of particular attention. Visiting classrooms in the teacher role will humanize you to all the students.

I developed a deeper appreciation for the teachers as I stepped into their shoes, and I would often be stopped in the hall by students who said, "Hey! You taught my class!" Molly Haney, an English teacher at Martin High School in Arlington, said, "I greatly appreciated when you presented your Magical Musical Tour lesson to my class. The students responded to having an even greater authority 'slum' back in the classroom just to teach them something. Although it was a few years ago, I still use your lessons, and your jokes!" (personal communication, Sept. 12, 2012). Keep your own skills sharp while building relationships by being willing to visit classrooms in a teacher role.

Benjamin Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic and author of "The Art of Possibility," said, "It is one of the characteristics of a leader that he not doubt for one moment the capacity of the people he's leading to realize whatever he's dreaming" (2008). Administrators who invite educators to utilize appraisal instruments as tools for professional growth in a mutually respectful and growth-focused way will be better positioned to keep in the faculty's minds the dreams of what they as educators and the campus as a whole can be.

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