



Just for the ASKing!



by Bruce Oliver

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Optimizing Classroom Observations



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* He is the author of *Points to Ponder* and also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning: Your Guide to PLCs and More..*

In a September 2018 article titled “The Particular Agony of Teacher Observations,” Arkansas Teacher of the Year and regular *Education Week Teacher* author, and regular *Education Week Teacher* author, Justin Minkel writes, “I hate being observed. When my principal walks in with her laptop or a clipboard and pen, I’m instantly affected by crippling self-doubt I haven’t felt since junior high. I scan the room with the alert panic a gazelle must feel when scanning the savannah for predators.” Justin may not be alone in his feelings of anxiety when a supervisor enters the classroom. It doesn’t have to be that way. Dread and fear can be minimized or completely eliminated when the leader of the school takes steps to examine how the staff reacts to observations and acts in an impartial and honest manner to address concerns that may be creating uneasiness or even angst. As the leader of the school, the principal has the authority and obligation to address these issues and needs wisdom and a repertoire of strategies to successfully seek solutions.

Culture

A first step a principal can take is to consider how the evaluative practices are impacting the culture of the school. It has been said that individuals do not always speak the truth to authority. Thus, it is very hard for leaders to fully know how staff members might feel about the process. A place to start is for the individuals who carry out observations as part of the evaluation process to have a closed-door conversation about their practices with no pretense,

no excuses, no judgments - candid dialogues and self-reflection. The next step can be to administer an anonymous survey to the teachers to learn their true feelings about the process. As the survey results are examined, leaders should not take the feedback personally but see the feedback as an opportunity to maintain or improve the school culture. An appropriate step to take is to share survey results with the staff as a way of saying, “We want to address the issue with openness and candor.”

Trust

Perhaps there is nothing more important in a school setting (besides teaching and learning) than the establishment and maintenance of trust. School should be a place where teachers trust administrators, administrators trust teachers, teachers trust their fellow co-workers, and most importantly, an environment where teachers and students share a mutual trust with one another. As the leader in the building, the principal sets the tone where trust prevails

by being open, forthright, and especially compassionate, rather than appearing to be standoffish, aloof, or inflexible. Building a sense of prevailing trust should be at the top of any leader's essential to-do list.

Transparency

How classroom visits are conducted should not be mysterious or appear to be an administrative secret. Teachers may not be aware of exactly what visitors are looking for when they come into their classrooms. Is their primary focus on student behavior and attentiveness? Are they looking for differentiated instruction, clarity of instructional delivery, deeper student thinking, frequent checks for understanding, or relationships with students? In truth, any or all of these priorities is appropriate since they constitute specific methodology teachers might follow. One experience a veteran principal shared with her staff was that an observer to a class would be looking for answers to three questions:

- What are students supposed to be learning?
- How does the teacher know that students are learning?
- How does the teacher determine what to do next?

Minkel views it this way: "Principals, superintendents, and policymakers can help move observations in the right direction by focusing on things that matter, like student engagement and creativity, rather than things that don't: an immaculate classroom, students who remain silent as monks when walking the hallway, and the obedient inscription of every lesson's objective on the board. (Is there a single one of us who recalls fondly, from our own time in school, that amazing lesson taught by a beloved teacher because of the numbered state standard written on the board?)"

Support

In any school, there are teachers who plan and carry out successful learning experiences with their students in a routine manner. Their in-class decision-making just seems to flow seemingly without much effort. In truth, these skills are learned over time and these individuals rarely ask for assistance. There are, however, staff members who need assistance. When the principal recognizes such a need, it is her professional responsibility to provide any and all backing to those people who require help.

The concept of fairness can come into play when a teacher requires support. When applied to students the definition of fairness is "giving each individual what he or she needs to be successful." The same definition can be applied to the teaching staff. The message to the teacher is, "I want you to be the best you can be so that all your students are learning."

Visibility

Strong leaders make it a priority to be out and about in the building as much as possible. Not only is this practice necessary to have a handle on what is going on instructionally, but it also sends the message to both students and teachers that the leader is interested in knowing what is happening in the classes, and that teaching and learning are important. These walk-through opportunities also afford opportunities for any administrator to provide feedback to practitioners especially when they can see distinct connections to what the teacher is doing and how well students are learning. Experienced educators Kim and Dave Marshall refer to principals making short, frequent, unannounced classroom visits, each followed by a face-to-face coaching conversation as a "keystone habit." They write, "This simple practice has an outsize impact on teaching, relationships, collaboration, and leadership, four of the most effective ways to improve student learning." As well, this practice of high visibility can dramatically increase the comfort level of the teaching staff. A new teacher once shared with her experienced colleague, "He was in my classroom today. What does that mean?" Her fellow teacher replied, "It's nothing to get upset about...he's in everybody's classroom all the time."



Additionally, an important tenet to share with the staff is that in the best case scenario is that an administrator's appearance in the room should be seen as "value added" to student learning and not as a distraction or the creator of uncomfortable stress for the teacher. As the year progresses, it should be seen as just another natural occurrence when an administrator is present in a classroom.

Confidence

In most schools across the country, administrators must complete announced observations. These situations often require the teacher to bring a proposed lesson plan to a conference and share the specifics of the lesson with the observer. Many schools provide a format teachers should follow in devising and presenting their plan. On occasion, as the proposed lesson is shared, the administrator can see flaws or gaps in the lesson that may not lead to the best outcome. The insightful leader will use these opportunities to provide one-on-one professional development. Asking the teacher questions that will allow her to reflect on her plan and fill in the necessary gaps can make these conversations more productive and complete. If the teacher hesitates or does not know what step to take, the observer can provide direct assistance. The message the leader conveys is: "I want this to be the best possible lesson you can design." The take-away for the teacher is: "I am confident that my leader does not want formal observations to be stressful or adversarial situations but ones that can be harmonious and supportive in nature."

Evidence

An evaluator cannot honestly develop a complete picture of how effective a teacher is simply through periodic observations and walk-through visits. Conferences between administrator and teacher, especially at mid-year, are an ideal time for teachers to supply additional data/information that will result in a more in-depth representation of a teacher's long-term performance. Some leaders ask teachers to bring selected items to a conference such as different types of assessment, evidence of differentiated lessons or a unit plan that demonstrates how lessons connect over a longer period. Allowing teachers to provide critical information shows the leader's desire to be as fair-minded as possible in fully assessing a classroom teacher's proficiency.

Replay

It is a fact of life that not all lessons go well. The old adage, "The best laid plans of mice and men go awry" can occur at any time. A lesson plan that looked good on paper may not unfold as expected. When an observer is present in the classroom, a teacher's anxiety can go into overdrive when things are falling apart. In such instances, a perceptive leader can react in several ways. She may choose to intercede by interacting with students to give the teacher time to recoup, remain in the room to learn how the teacher rebounds from an unfortunate situation, or signal to the teacher in a supportive manner that she will come back at another time. A discerning leader can later communicate that he will complete another observation, thus canceling out the lesson that did not go well. We often give students a second chance to improve their work before receiving a grade. A teacher can be granted the same opportunity. Such an action on the part of the leader is one more example of how she wants the evaluation process to be evenhanded and fair for the teaching staff.

Reflection

When a leader is visible throughout the building on a regular basis, teachers can become more comfortable when an administrator visits a classroom. These drop-ins are often accompanied by follow-up chats between observer and teacher. The dialogues can include insights especially when the observer can provide important evidence of student learning that she observed, or occurrences that the teacher may have missed. The conversation may also present opportunities for the teacher to reflect on her practices that will help her to further strengthen her "A" game. These informal discourses will eventually become second nature and not be viewed in a negative context.



Efficacy

Efficacy is defined as the ability to produce a desired result, e.g., success or effectiveness. In the long run, any leader wants all teachers to be able to self-assess their efficiency and make the necessary adjustments that will result in continued improvement. Former principal and author Kim Marshall believes that unannounced classroom visits can foster teacher efficacy. He writes, “Frequent substantive, reality-based conversations with a supervisor give teachers a sense of how their work fits into the overall mission of the school. Positive professional working conditions help retain effective teachers and attract high-quality educators from other schools. Everyone wants to be part of a winning team with ongoing support and dialogue.”

Approachability

In an environment where teachers feel that the evaluation process is clear and balanced, the leader is viewed in a positive manner and is seen as someone who is congenial, open, and accessible. In such an environment, teachers look forward to classroom visits and often invite administrators to come and observe lessons that allow their students to demonstrate their skills. Laughter and light-hearted banter become the norm between adults. When things may not be going well for a particular teacher, he is more willing to ask his leader for help because he knows it will be provided in a professional manner.

WE Can Do This!

Justin Minkel’s words provide invaluable insight and convey his strong desire to have a glorious outcome from the observation process.

“None of this means that you or I won’t experience crippling anxiety and self-doubt if our principal walks in tomorrow morning, clipboard in hand, at the precise moment our math lesson wobbles off the rails. But we can take a deep breath, consider our strengths, and get the kids started on their work. We can trust that the observers whose opinions truly matter will see what matters most: an imperfect but glorious class of young humans sharing the company of their glorious but imperfect teacher, all of us bringing our best selves to this messy, complicated, beautiful profession at the heart of it all.”



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