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Key understandings in teacher evaluation for the beginning principal

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Abstract

The role of the principal is demanding and complex, with many of the activities requiring significant expenditures of time. Among these are supervising both the support and professional staffs, disciplining students, developing the master class schedule, directing activities, hiring and firing staff, serving as instructional leader, and evaluating teacher performance. Supervising and evaluating teacher performance may be the most important of all these responsibilities however, because it gives the principal an opportunity to help teachers improve teaching performance. A principal should be able to help the teacher develop more productive teaching techniques. A school is eventually only as good as its teachers, and the person ultimately responsible for teacher performance is the principal.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS IN TEACHER EVALUATION

FOR THE BEGINNING PRINCIPAL

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by

Robert Marc Cue

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The role of the principal is demanding and complex, with many of the activities requiring significant expenditures of time. Among these are supervising both the support and professional staffs, disciplining students, developing the master class schedule, directing activities, hiring and firing staff, serving as instructional leader, and evaluating teacher performance. Supervising and evaluating teacher performance may be the most important of all these responsibilities however, because it gives the principal an opportunity to help teachers improve teaching performance.

A principal should be able to help the teacher develop more productive teaching techniques. A school is eventually only as good as its teachers, and the person ultimately responsible for teacher performance is the principal.

Most administrators agree that evaluating teacher performance is the most important function of principals (Larson 1984). For the beginning principal it may be the most anxiety laden of all the responsibilities at the very least. The beginning principal must know what the purpose of evaluation is, what the nature of effective teaching is, what evalu-

ation methods are available and how to use them, and how teachers perceive evaluation. This paper is devoted to a consideration of those questions.

What is the purpose of teacher evaluation? A good teacher evaluation system is vital in identifying, remediating, and if necessary, dismissing ineffective teachers (Huddle 1985). Fredrich (1984) emphasizes this latter focus by stating that, almost exclusively, the actual purpose for evaluation is to determine the professional future of the teacher, to decide whether a teacher will be granted permanent certification or tenure, or be released. However, most writers agree with McGreal (1982), that the most important purpose is improving instruction. They agree that evaluation should be realistic and practical and should enhance the supervisor-teacher relationship.

Once the purpose of evaluation has been established, the principal must be able to identify the characteristics of effective teaching and effective teachers. But what is effective teaching? Beach and Reinhartz (1984), identify effective teaching by comparing specific teacher characteristics with measured classroom performance. Cangelosi (1984), points out that many teacher evaluation models identify effective

teaching by how well students achieve learning goals.

In the literature, certain concepts recur.
Everyone seems to agree on the concepts to be evalu-
ated, but they fail to agree on the relative impor-
tance of the specific criteria (King, 1978). Research
studies summarized by Beach and Reinhartz (1984) have
identified several variables of effective teaching
that can be positively correlated with student learn-
ing. The work of Beach and Reinhartz seems particu-
larly useful for the beginning principal because it is
clear and easily understandable by even the inexperi-
enced classroom observer. These variables commonly
seen in teacher evaluation models, according to Beach
and Reinhartz, can be broken down into six skill areas.
These skill areas include:

1. Clarity of instruction. Is there evidence of
planning? Is there evidence that involves organizing
instruction, including sequencing, pacing, adjusting
instruction, and arranging smooth transitions?
Descriptors may include: knowing his or her subject;
reviewing procedures often; planning lessons that in-
clude a rationale, objectives, discussion of teaching
techniques, and content and evaluations procedures;
providing clear, concise directions; using examples

and visuals to make abstract concepts easier to understand.

2. Enthusiasm during instruction. Does the teacher enjoy what he or she is doing? Enthusiasm seems to increase recall, produce comprehensive learning gains, improve attitudes, and increase divergent thinking. Descriptors may include: smiling and maintaining eye contact, making learning fun, being motivated and motivating others, and modeling a positive attitude toward students and learning.

3. Task orientation. Were the students actively and productively engaged in the learning process? Descriptors may include: being businesslike; allotting time for practicing newly acquired skills; having specific, well-defined objectives; and spending less time on developing skills.

4. Instructional strategies. Was there evidence that the teacher used a variety of teaching techniques that vary with the subject, learning task, developmental levels of the students, and individual learning styles? Descriptors may include: using a variety of instructional strategies; varying the number of memory tasks, higher cognitive tasks, and drill work; discounting the myth that one method fits all; and

appealing to several senses when delivering instruction.

    5. Interaction with students. Was there a positive climate for learning? Was the relationship between the teacher and the students businesslike, fair, open, and honest? Descriptors may include: communicating to students that they have worth and dignity; modeling traits of patience and understanding; asking for feedback to give students an opportunity to evaluate lessons, topics, and the teacher; and working to develop a vocabulary of praise words.

    6. Use of interesting questions. Did the teacher ask a large number of questions? Did the teacher ask a broad range of questions including recall and probing questions? Descriptors may include: inviting students to ask questions, preparing a list of possible questions for each lesson, asking higher order questions to get students to think, asking questions to get students involved and excited about the lesson, and using wait time (Pp. 32, 33).

    An awareness of these variables will give the new principal a good understanding of how to identify effective teaching. Identifying the characteristics of effective teaching is, of course, not all there is to teacher evaluation. However, Thomas (1974) is

persuasive when he asserts that the ability to iden-
tify effective teachers, or effective teaching, is
crucial to teacher education, selection, performance,
and ultimately to the survival of human society.

The "how" of evaluation is also crucial to
effective systems of evaluation, and the procedures to
be employed are the subject of many authorities in the
field. Much of the evaluation of teachers today is
done by the building principal and the evaluation
process, when done thoroughly, takes a great deal of
time. In fact, Mooney (1984) believes that lack of
time might be the biggest obstacle to achieving
effective supervision, largely because of the demands
identified earlier which erode so much of the
principal's time.

Nevertheless, among the tools available to the
building principal and other evaluators is the pre-
post observation conference model, also known as
clinical supervision. This approach is one of the
oldest and most widely used evaluation procedures
today (MacNaughton, Rogus, & Tracy, 1984). The model
consists of three basic areas: The pre-conference,
the observation, and the post-conference. The main
purpose of this model is to assess and eventually to

improve classroom performance.

The pre-conference or goal-setting conference is very important. In its most effective format, the goal-setting process is a cooperative activity between the principal and the teacher that results in a mutually agreeable focus (McGreal, 1982). The focus of this conference should be on the lesson to be observed, the objectives to be met, the materials and activities to be used, and the expected outcomes of the lesson. The number of objectives should be logical in terms of the level of difficulty of the subject matter and time available (Mooney, 1984). This goal-setting conference should last anywhere from twenty to thirty minutes. The principal must know what the teacher has planned for the lesson and also must establish the time for the classroom visit. The principal is a much better observer when he or she goes into the classroom with a knowledge of what is going to take place (Crews, 1981).

The observation will occur at the time agreed upon by the principal and teacher. Mooney (1984) believes there are four basic rules an evaluator should follow: 1) Arrive before the start of the lesson and remain until the lesson ends; leaving may be perceived

as a sign of dissatisfaction by the teacher   2) Greet
the teacher in a friendly manner 3) Take a seat that
makes you unobtrusive 4) Do not participate in the
lesson. More damage is done to the principal-teacher
relationship during the classroom visit than in any
other aspect of the evaluation process (Grossnickle &
Thiel, 1981). To alleviate the likelihood of damage,
the teacher and students should know in advance when
and why the principal is visiting. This will elimi-
nate student curiosity and create a near-normal class-
room environment.

Many school districts today are incorporating the
checklist rating system into the pre-post observation
model. The checklist notes all the behaviors a prin-
cipal will evaluate. These behaviors are usually
followed by various descriptive terms and may vary
from one model to the next, but they all ask the ob-
server to classify or categorize each of the observed
behaviors. Carfield and Walter (1984) use the follow-
ing descriptors in order to classify teaching behaviors:
superior, highly effective, acceptable but needs im-
provement, and unacceptable or is incompetent in this
area. The principal checks off each behavior in one of
these categories as it is noted during the observation.

The classroom visit is not the only way to observe a lesson. Videotaping can be a useful tool because it provides a permanent, replayable record and the principal need not be present (Meierdiercks, 1981). Seeking reactions from students, when allowed by the district contract, may also be useful in evaluating instruction. The principal should find out what students think is going on in the classroom. What is the teacher doing day in and day out? The problem with talking to students about a particular teacher's class is, of course, the possibility of bias. Research demonstrates that judgment may fluctuate with personal biases of the observer and yield invalid and inconsistent results even when highly structured observation instruments are used by experienced observers (Haefele, 1980). The beginning principal must remember that a teacher may have a disorganized room that upsets or negatively biases some observers, yet the teacher may communicate very effectively with students (Haefele, 1980).

Another way of getting a better perspective on what is going on in a classroom is to look over the material prepared by the teacher. McGreal (1982) believes that artifact collection should be a regular

part of the evaluation process. Artifacts include study guides, question sheets, homework assignments, practice sets, experiments, description of drills and practice activities, quizzes, and tests. Do these artifacts reinforce the lessons being taught? This non-formal evaluation process may actually be better than some of the formal models available, but it seems the most reliable evaluation process would be one that is continuous and incorporates ideas from both formal and non-formal evaluation.

Once the evaluation has been completed, the evaluator and the teacher should establish a time for the post-observation conference. This conference should take place within one or two days after the observation. Research has shown that teachers are anxious and interested in obtaining feedback after a visitation (Grossnickle & Thiel, 1981). Many times the post-observation conference gets delayed or may never take place, a clearly unacceptable practice.

The post-observation conference should determine what can be done to improve the teacher's instructional abilities. According to Cangelosi (1984) the focus of this conference should be: How did this lesson affect the students? Did the lesson observed meet the

objectives the teacher and the principal determined earlier?

Carfield and Walter (1984) believe that the principal should bring out both the teacher's strengths and weaknesses during this conference in order to build certain of the weaknesses into strengths. From the evaluation results, the principal and the teacher can then cooperatively develop an instructional improvement plan, designating responsibility for what is going to be done and when it will be accomplished (Larson, 1984).

When the beginning principal knows what effective teaching is and what evaluation model is most usable for him or her, the principal should gain insight into the feelings that teachers have about evaluation. Teachers often see the evaluation process as a threat and have a fear of being unfairly evaluated. The teacher evaluation process can be a painful and counter-productive experience, creating feelings of hostility, resentment, and skepticism (Grossnickle & Thiel, 1981). Teacher morale can be adversely affected by the evaluation process. Teachers who feel that the principal is out to get them may quit trying and become unproductive teachers. Grossnickle and Thiel (1981) believe that

collective bargaining agreements have had a negative impact on teacher evaluation.

How can the negative feelings of evaluation be eliminated? Cooperation and trust may be the key ingredients. Teachers must be allowed to help establish the basic criteria for an evaluation model. This gives the teachers an opportunity to integrate some of their own personal goals into the goals of the school system. This will demonstrate to the teachers that their ideas and contributions are valued and needed (Larson, 1984).

A collegial approach to evaluation may relieve some of the teacher anxiety about evaluation and may help motivate teachers to do a better job. Erlandson and Pastor (1981) have found that teachers have a need to express creativity and a desire for a close collegial relationship. Both of these needs are components found to be directly correlated with teacher motivation and productivity. The more productive a teacher is, the more effective he or she will also be. Carfield and Walter (1984) firmly believe that the key to success is a collegial relationship between the principal and the teacher. If the threat of job loss is minimized, teachers can concentrate on strengthening weaknesses.

Another important ingredient is trust. The
ultimate test of an evaluation system is whether a
relationship of mutual trust exists between principal
and teacher when they meet (McGreal, 1982). Gaining
the trust of all faculty members is no easy task.
Fredrich (1984) found that the more a teacher needed
supervisory help, the less willing or able he or she
will be to enter into a trusting relationship with
the one individual who has the power to determine his
or her professional status. Fredrich also points out
another disadvantage to the principal: He or she
cannot have expertise in all subject areas to provide
the correct subject-oriented advice, a reality that
complicates the development of a trusting relationship.

Without a trusting relationship, can the evalua-
tion process be a helpful tool in the nurturing of
teacher improvement? According to Salek (1975)
reciprocal trust is the basic ingredient for the
nurturing of relationships between principals and
teachers in which they help each other.

The message is clear: A successful evaluation program is not easy to implement. It requires thoughtful planning and continuous monitoring if it is to achieve what it set out to achieve: Increased teacher effectiveness (Churnside, 1984). The beginning principal must do his or her best in order to carry out the evaluation process. This process involves being able to identify effective teaching, knowing how to use a particular evaluation model, realizing that many teachers are threatened by evaluation, and seeing that a collegial approach between principal and teacher exists.

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