

HOW TO DELIVER FEEDBACK

After virtually every mini-observation, principals will have several follow-up thoughts for the teacher. These might include praise, reinforcement, questions, suggestions, criticism, or blunt redirection. It's important for the principal to decide on no more than one or two items; too much information will be overwhelming and greatly reduce the teacher's chances taking it in and following up.

What's the best way to share the feedback? Some principals leave a Post-it note on the teacher's desk on the way out with quick jottings. (*Great lesson! Where did you find that amazing map?*) Others prefer to fill out a checklist and put it in the teacher's mailbox. Others devise their own formats for written notes (a box for "Wow" and a box for "I wonder . . ."). And others e-mail their comments. All of these methods convey feedback, and all are better than no feedback at all. (That drives teachers crazy: *What did he think?!*)

But putting mini-observation feedback in writing has several disadvantages. It raises the anxiety level on both sides, especially when there is criticism. Written communication also limits the amount and subtlety of what's communicated and makes administrators that much more leery about lowering the boom. It's time-consuming, which can make the whole mini-observation process more daunting and cut down on frequency. And finally, written feedback almost always ends up being a one-way street from principal to teacher (few teachers take the time to respond to written notes or checklists). Without dialogue and active reflection on the teacher's part, it's much less likely that adult learning will take place. In the words of Steven Levy, writing in *Newsweek* (2007),

In conversations, I can talk with [people], and a casual remark can lead to a level of discussion that neither party anticipated from the beginning. I am more likely to learn from someone in a conversation than an e-mail exchange, which simply does not allow for the serendipity, intensity and give-and-take of real-time interaction.

For these reasons, my strong preference is for face-to-face feedback after each mini-observation. Informal, low-stakes conversations (mine were almost always stand-up chats in classrooms, hallways, the copy room, or the parking lot after school) have these important advantages:

- It's possible to communicate a lot of information quite quickly.
- Teachers are less nervous and more likely to be open to feedback.

- The principal can get a sense of whether the teacher is ready to receive critical feedback; if the teacher seems to be in a fragile or hostile frame of mind, it's smart to hold off.
- The teacher can quickly give the principal additional information about the lesson or unit, filling in the bigger picture of what happened before and the visit.
- The principal can get quick answers to questions about the curriculum or materials.
- The teacher can correct a possible misunderstanding of something that happened during the mini-observation.
- The conversation can segue into a more general assessment of how the year is going and ideas for the future.
- Finally, there's no paperwork and the process is much less time-consuming.

These are compelling reasons for always giving feedback in person and engaging each teacher in a genuinely two-way conversation about the substance of what was observed. Ideally, teachers leave feedback conversations with specific ideas for improving their practice—or a warm feeling that their work is appreciated by an intelligent and thoughtful colleague.

Quick service is important after mini-observations. It's best if follow-up talks happen within twenty-four hours, and that's easier to pull off if they are kept quick and informal. Brevity is easier to achieve if the principal thinks through the opening thirty seconds of the feedback conversation in advance. I tried to plan and mentally rehearse my opening thoughts so we could quickly cut to the chase. There's a lot to be said for beginning with a declarative statement: "I was really struck by how well those math manipulatives were working to teach the part-whole principle," or "I'm concerned that boys were dominating that discussion on the causes of World War I." When a principal leads off with an open-ended question, teachers can become wary, sensing that a point is being made indirectly and that there's a "right" answer they should be giving. But if the principal is genuinely puzzled, leading off with a question is the right thing to do.

Face-to-face talks can be richly informative for teachers (and principals too), but principals sometimes pull their punches. School leaders who are overly concerned with maintaining harmonious relationships with the staff (or being *liked*) may hold off on criticizing teachers who need it. Intestinal fortitude and a

willingness to accept a certain amount of anger and stomach-churn are obviously vital to overcoming this barrier. Frequent classroom visits and informal, low-stakes feedback chats are also very helpful. Teachers are much more likely to accept criticism from a principal who gives them lots of feedback, most of it positive and appreciative.

Okay, face-to-face feedback has strong advantages—but is it possible for a principal to catch up with every teacher after every mini-observation? And what about superstar teachers? Do they really need feedback when they're already performing at a very high level?

I believe that all teachers, including superstars, are hungry for feedback. They spend most of their working days with students and are intensely curious about what other adults think—especially their boss. When I was a principal, I kept a small laminated copy of the school's master schedule in my shirt pocket to help me target teachers' free periods, and I made it my business to track down every teacher I'd observed and give in-person feedback within twenty-four hours. Sometimes I missed my self-imposed deadline, but I kept pushing myself until I'd closed the loop. It's a question of priorities. If you believe something is important, you make the time. One thing is very clear: talking to teachers about teaching and learning in their classrooms is a much better use of a principal's time than doing e-mail.

Large schools are more of a challenge, but principals don't have to do this work all alone. Assistant principals, department heads, deans, and others can share the job of doing mini-observations. In one Massachusetts high school, the principal and assistant principal split the staff in two. Other administrators prefer doing mini-observations in tandem, comparing notes after they leave each classroom (people often see quite different things in the same visit). Others prefer having all administrators see all classrooms, comparing notes in weekly meetings on what they're seeing and which teachers need follow-up. Some principals do mini-observations with an instructional coach; since coaches have deeper pedagogical content knowledge than principals, they can "tutor" the boss on the finer points of lessons in their area after each visit.