Educational Leadership

How to Talk So Teachers Listen

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Teacher leaders encourage professional growth by engaging colleagues in positive conversations about their teaching practices.
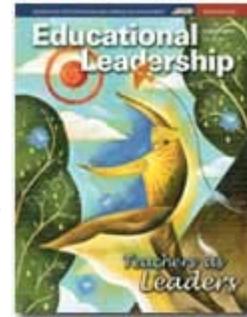
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As the first line of support for classroom and school improvement efforts, school-based instructional specialists face a variety of challenges, among them the need to engage their peers in purposeful conversations about learners and learning. Their manner of talking can determine whether they're seen as well-meaning colleagues who dispense advice or teacher leaders who ignite learning.

Consider the following scenario. As part of their school's initiative on improving student writing, Susan, a literacy specialist, visits the 3rd grade classroom of her colleague, Barbara. Susan invites Barbara to share some writing samples that illustrate her students' progress. The teachers sit side by side, with the chosen work samples and grade-level writing standards focusing the conversation.

Susan begins from a *coaching* stance. "As you examine these pieces of writing," she asks, "what are some of the things you notice?"

Barbara points at one of the work samples and remarks, "This student really stands out because he demonstrates a rich use of vocabulary. He's clearly at a level 4 on the rubric in vocabulary and usage."

After the two teachers briefly discuss what might be producing success for this student and how he compares with others in the class, Susan asks, "What percentage of your students operate at this level?"

Here, Barbara expresses concern that although this student and others are doing well, about 40 percent of the students are scoring 2s and 3s on the same measurement. She laments, "I'm using the recommended strategies. I just don't know what else to do."

Sensing Barbara's frustration, Susan shifts to a more *consultative* stance. Rather than prescribing solutions, she suggests potential causes:

> A few things might contribute to the different performance levels. Some of your students may need a more scaffolded approach to writing; they may need to isolate parts of speech and build word banks. Some students might be inhibited by spelling limitations. If that's the case, they might benefit initially from partnering with stronger writers to compose together. Or, because reading and writing are so tightly linked, the solution might lie in targeted reading instruction that highlights vocabulary and word usage. On the basis of what you know about your class, which of these seem most likely?

Considering the possibilities, Barbara thinks that additional scaffolding has the greatest potential for promoting student growth. However, she's not sure how to begin.

In response, Susan takes a *collaborative* approach to considering next steps. She invites Barbara to select a work sample from a lower-performing student and suggests,

> Let's examine the word choices this student is making and list the verbs she uses. We can use the list to create instructional exercises. Why don't you start by naming some of the verbs you have concerns about?

After another 15 minutes, the conversation closes, with Barbara suggesting several strategies she intends to use and describing how she will monitor their effectiveness. They agree to meet in two weeks to discuss the results of her efforts.

Effective learning-focused conversations like this one include three vital elements: a psychologically safe environment; a clear focus; and a differentiated approach in which the specialist alternately coaches, collaborates, and consults, depending on the colleague's responses.

Making It Safe

Teachers can perceive the work of school improvement as corrective, particularly experienced teachers who are passionate about their present ways of operating. To be successful, teacher leaders must stimulate the exploration of instructional practice, increase receptivity to new ideas, and help forge connections between present practice and new initiatives. This productive professional talk requires a psychologically safe environment to open both the physical and the metaphorical doors that can serve as barriers between instructional specialists and their colleagues.

Specialists must use several skills in concert that invite and sustain collaborative thinking. These include fully attending to the conversation physically, emotionally, and cognitively by leaning in, making eye contact, and offering other nonverbal acknowledgements; listening to understand the other's perspective; and purposefully choosing exploratory language and a cordial intonation.

Establishing a Clear Focus

Skillful facilitation of learning-focused conversations involves the thoughtful analysis of multiple sources of data that relate to agreed-on standards of practice. These data emerge from the processes and products of student learning and include such items as student work samples, assessment results, classroom observations, lesson plans, and classroom artifacts. Teachers can use the data to compare students and groups of students within a classroom, grade level, school, and school district. Keeping the standards for teaching and learning as a central focus helps teachers address achievement gaps and promotes greater understanding about what is working, who is learning, and what teachers might do to improve instructional practice.

To create greater psychological safety for both novice and veteran teachers, skillful instructional specialists use data and standards as a "third point" (Grinder, 1997). They focus conversations not on the teacher's teaching practices, but on the factors producing positive results as well as performance gaps. The third point puts the information safely off to the side for specialist and colleague to examine and explore together.

Differentiating Support

To maximize the effectiveness of exchanges in both one-to-one and group conversations, skillful instructional specialists differentiate their approach by practicing the three stances Susan used in the opening scenario: coaching, collaborating, and consulting. Their choice of stance depends on the teacher's degree of knowledge and experience, his or her emotional and cognitive readiness, and whether the issue in question involves an immediate need or a long-term outcome. Skillful

specialists navigate along a continuum, shifting as needed among stances, to develop teachers' capacities to use data to inform their practice, make increasingly effective choices, and engage in standards-driven self-assessment.

The aim is to develop teachers' collective efficacy, support self-directed learning, and enhance capacities for engaging in ongoing, professionally rich, collegial relationships (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000). Two key attributes define each stance: who is providing the bulk of the information and who is problem solving.

Coaching

In the coaching stance, the teacher is the primary source of information and analysis. The instructional specialist paraphrases and inquires to increase awareness, broaden perspectives, and clarify issues. The Cognitive Coaching Model (Costa & Garmston, 2002) defines this stance as mediating the underlying thinking that drives the observable behaviors of teaching. This skillful exchange supports a teacher's awareness; idea production; and the exploration of choices, possibilities, and connections.

For example, in the opening scenario, Susan's inquiries caused Barbara to identify student success as compared to a standard, generate specific reasons for this success, and make generalizations about the class that helped focus the conversation on improving all students' learning.

Coaching should be the default stance. That is, effective instructional specialists begin and end the conversation from a coaching stance. However, the coaching stance assumes that the other party has the inner resources to generate instructional ideas. If this is not the case, pursuing this stance can lead to individual and shared frustration. You cannot coach out of someone something that is not within them. Under those conditions, providing information with which to work is a productive and appropriate choice. Thus, after Barbara expressed frustration with several students' low scores in writing, Susan moved out of the coaching stance to suggest several possible causes. Navigating the continuum from a coaching stance to a consultative or a collaborative stance moves the conversation forward and furthers learning.

Collaborating

In the collaborative stance, the instructional specialist and teacher codevelop ideas and coanalyze situations, work products, and other data, once they have clarified the problem. The instructional specialist's purposeful pausing and paraphrasing open up the emotional and cognitive space for collaborative productivity. Using inclusive pronouns, such as *us, our*, and *we*, enhances the invitation to the teacher to contribute ideas. For example, in the opening scenario, once Barbara and Susan identified possible causes for gaps in student performance, they worked together to generate potential strategies for designing next steps.

The collaborative stance signals respect and the expectation of a collegial relationship. However, instructional specialists must carefully monitor their actions in this stance—they need to resist the impulse to jump in. Being overly enthusiastic about an approach or being adamant about the "right" way to do something may override the intention to cocreate ideas and possibilities. In this case, collaboration can degenerate into dispensing advice.

Consulting

In the consulting stance, the instructional specialist supplies information, identifies and analyzes gaps, suggests solutions, thinks aloud about cause-and-effect relationships, and makes connections to principles of practice. Skillful learning-focused consultation provides essential information about learning and learners, curriculum and content, policies, standards, and effective practices in ways that are immediately useful and build capacity over time. Learning-focused leaders make their thinking transparent, enabling colleagues to access their experience

as a lens for problem solving. As teachers internalize principles of learning and teaching, these expert lenses become mental resources for the teachers to independently generate solutions. In our scenario, Susan shifted to a learning-focused consultative stance with Barbara by offering three possible causes for students' low performance in writing.

If overused, the consultant stance can build dependency rather than capacity. Providing advice without explaining the underlying rationale curtails a colleague's ability to transfer new learning to personal contexts or generate solutions independently. Therefore, it is important to distinguish learning-focused consultation from simply "fixing" things or telling teachers what to do. Specialists may observe pressing needs in classrooms and want to quickly provide information to help the teacher. However, they may miss context-rich learning opportunities if they limit their consulting repertoire to telling (see "Eight Strategies for Learning-Focused Consulting," p. 32).

Sustaining the Conversation

High-performing teacher leaders have the ability to focus attention and resources where they make the greatest difference (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Using sophisticated data is an important part of this equation (Reeves, 2002). However, all the data analysis skills in the world have little effect if teacher leaders are unable to frame productive conversations about that data with teachers (Wellman & Lipton, 2004). What teacher leaders talk about with their colleagues matters. But *how* they talk—so teachers listen—can matter even more.

Eight Strategies for Learning-Focused Consulting

1. **Offer a Menu of Choices**. If one idea is useful, several are even more effective. Suggest at least three options when planning or problem solving. This provides information and support while leaving the decision making—and the responsibility—with your colleague.

2. **Think Aloud.** Just as in instructional problem solving or strategic reading, sharing your thought processes with your colleague, along with a solution or idea, enhances learning and maximizes the likelihood of their transferring this knowledge to future applications.

3. **Share the What, Why, and How.** When sharing expertise, describe the what, why, and how of an idea or suggestion. This might sound like, "Here is a strategy for addressing that issue (what), which is likely to be effective because (why), and this is how you might apply it (how)."

4. **State a Principle of Practice**. Connect a specific strategy or solution to the broader principles of effective practice to give colleagues the opportunity to learn and apply the principle in other situations. This might sound like, "An important principle of practice related to (topic) is _____, so a strategy like (suggestion) should be effective in this situation."

5. **Generate Categories.** Addressing ideas or solutions as categories provides a wider range of choice and a richer opportunity for learning than addressing discrete strategies or applications. For example, a category such as "grouping students" is broader and richer than "putting students in pairs" or a specific partnering strategy.

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6. **Name Causal Factors.** Rather than suggesting potential solutions, offer several factors that might be causing the problem. This option is particularly advisable when working with experienced teachers. This might sound like, "There are several things that might typically produce that behavior (or result); for example, _____, _____, or _____. Given what you know about your situation, what's your hunch about which of these, if any, might be a factor?"

7. **Consider an Alternative Point of View.** When idea generation bogs down, sharing additional points of view can reenergize the conversation. For example, offer thoughts on how parents, administrators, or students might consider the issue.

8. **Reframe the Problem or Issue.** Expert problem solvers spend more time defining a problem than strategizing solutions. Novel approaches to defining a problem not only release new energy and ideas, but often lead to more effective solutions. Reframing the problem could mean including positive or useful aspects of the issue or alternative descriptions of the goal or approach to the problem. This might sound like, "Although 60 percent of your students are not meeting the standard, 40 percent are. Let's examine what's producing their success."

Source: *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning*, by L. Lipton and B. Wellman, 2002, Sherman, CT: MiraVia. Adapted with permission.

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