Providing Effective Instructional Feedback
GLISI Research Brief

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The engine of school improvement is feedback. Though the education airspace is swirling with curriculum reforms and scheduling adjustments and improvement plans, the direct pathway to helping teachers to more effectively teach is via feedback about their teaching performance. Yet data tell us that few teachers, and even fewer principals, receive regular feedback that is concrete, specific, instructionally-relevant and likely to help them improve classroom instruction.

But why? In this brief, we will explore the importance of providing effective performance feedback, highlight common barriers encountered by education leaders and teachers in the feedback process, and pose questions for district and school leaders to consider to make the feedback process more effective.

Current Practice in Performance Feedback

Performance feedback is "information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal"[i] and is usually provided via written form or a face-to-face interaction following an observation.[ii] It is marked by goal-setting, communication, and clear performance standards[iii] and is critical not only for advancing teachers' learning and professional growth, but also for increasing student achievement.[iv] Research tells us that many instructional leaders struggle to provide high quality feedback for two reasons: 1) they do not know how and 2) if they did know how, they do not have time to do it effectively.[v] In a study of nearly 3,000 education leaders' expertise in observing instruction, Stephen Fink found that on average, most education leaders scored at the novice or emerging categories.[vi] Peter DeWitt, on the other hand, found that managing the challenges and responsibilities in their day-to-day work gives many principals the impression that there's no time to give the feedback process the attention it deserves.[vii] Recent studies confirm that many principals devote only a small portion of their time to activities that lead to improved instruction, but even this time rarely leads to improved teacher effectiveness and student performance.[viii]

Consequently, what many teachers receive in the way of instructional feedback commonly looks more like evaluation, advice, and/or praise than it does thoughtful information that stretches their learning. For many administrators, especially those early in their careers, it is very easy to 'fall into the trap of giving advice and not feedback'[ix] or deliver praise in the form of complimentary statements like "great work" or "wonderful job."[x] And while such statements can be valuable for encouragement, they don't constitute effective feedback. But if neither advice nor praise constitutes effective feedback, what exactly does?

On the most basic level, effective feedback is about coaching through dialogue and is more of 'a conversation…than a lecture.'[xi] This means that leaders in supervisory roles spend more time asking questions and listening than talking and telling.[xii] For instance, during a classroom observation, a supervisor could ask herself: 1) What do I notice about the teaching and learning occurring in the classroom? 2) Based upon what I've noticed and thought about during my observation, what feedback would I provide for the teacher? 3) Based on what I've noticed in

this class and others across the school, what steps would I take to lead, guide and support the professional learning of teachers throughout the school?[xiii] Then, as a way to facilitate the post-observation feedback session, the supervisor could ask questions that promote reflective thinking in the teacher, such as: What was your learning objective for today? How well did the lesson meet the objective? What challenges did you experience in trying to meet that objective? What do you recall about your instruction that helped you achieve your objective or hindered you from achieving it?[xiv]

Pursuing this line of questioning means that supervisors must strive to be aware of the extent to which their own biases and preferences regarding feedback "meet the developmental needs and capacities of the adults"[xv] with whom they're working. In other words, supervisors must use differentiated approaches to providing feedback. This is especially important in light of research that discovered that the emotional and cognitive dynamics of the feedback process are oftentimes volatile, complicating the role of the individual delivering the feedback and that of the individual receiving it.[xvi] Of course, this reinforces the importance of supervisors building trusting relationships with their personnel and working to customize feedback "in ways that both meet individuals where they are and support growth by offering developmentally appropriate challenges seeking to understand those individuals' learning needs."[xvii]

Teacher/Leader Evaluation Systems

For many state departments of education, the urgency to better equip principals to be instructional leaders has been the impetus for developing and implementing new teacher and leader evaluation systems. Within the last five years, states like Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Georgia,[xviii] to name a few, have unveiled robust, standards-based evaluation systems designed not only to assess teachers' and leaders' effectiveness, but also to support their professional development and increase student achievement. Georgia, for example, developed dual evaluation systems, one for teachers known as the Teacher Keys Evaluation System (TKES) and another for leaders, known as the Leadership Keys Evaluation Systems (LKES). Both systems feature the feedback process as a key element to promoting improvement across all levels: leaders, teachers, and students. As described by the Georgia Department of Education, "The goal of Georgia's TKES is to provide teachers with meaningful feedback and support opportunities which lead to improved teacher performance and consequently, improved student outcomes," and "The goal of Georgia's LKES is to provide leaders with meaningful feedback and to support the continuous growth and development of each leader by monitoring, analyzing, and applying pertinent data from multiple sources toward attainment of established Performance Goals."[xix] Granted, these evaluation systems are bigger than the feedback processes embedded in them, but educators must not overlook the importance of deepening their skills and resolving to provide ongoing effective performance feedback to realize the potential of Georgia's new teacher and leader evaluation systems to improve educator capacity and student outcomes.

Steps to Providing Effective Feedback

As a part of their embedded feedback processes, evaluation systems like Georgia's TKES and LKES provide instructional leaders with multiple opportunities throughout the year to observe teachers' practice and provide feedback through conferences. While each system also provides rubrics and sample indicators to help supervisors identify good practice during the observations and evaluation processes, there are no explicit directions on *how* to provide feedback during a conference. But as research shows, the way in which feedback is delivered is also a critical part of ensuring its effectiveness.[xx] Paul Bambrick-Santoyo offers six steps to establishing an effective feedback process:

1. **Provide Precise Praise**: If possible and when appropriate, offer praise in an area where the individual has previously received feedback and has now demonstrated improvement.
2. **Probe**: Identify a specific area of the observed lesson and pose an open-ended question intended to promote self-reflective thinking in the teacher.
3. **Identify the Problem and Concrete Action Step**: Encourage the teacher to identify the instructional challenge/problem and identify the appropriate action to solve the problem as means of further promoting independent, reflective thinking in the teacher.

4. **Practice**: Create opportunities for teachers to practice the newly identified action step in real time, all while coaching the teacher.

5. **Plan Ahead**: Having assisted the teacher in identifying the action step and practicing, encourage teachers to build the action step into their lesson plans.

6. **Set a Timeline**: Along with the teacher, establish an implementation timeline not only to monitor the teacher's progress, but also to assist her with staying on target.[xxi]

Bambrick-Santoyo outlines clearly the specific behaviors and actions that should facilitate the feedback process. But of course, there is little value in the feedback if it is not implemented. One way supervisors can ensure implementation follows the feedback is to use accountability tools, like observation spreadsheets, to not only assess the degree to which their feedback is being implemented and leading to improvement, but also to manage their own progress in providing feedback.[xxii]

Assumptions to Avoid When Providing Effective Feedback

But is providing effective feedback that leads to improved performance really as simple as following a set of steps like those outlined above? Practically speaking, probably not. According to Bambrick-Santoyo, there are five common assumptions supervisors tend to make during their feedback processes that can hinder instructional growth and are therefore important to avoid.

1. **More Is Better**: Many supervisors feel compelled to offer an abundance of feedback on many aspects of an individual's performance. The more effective strategy, however, is to offer small nuggets of feedback in just a few areas [xxiii] that will result in action steps aimed at helping the teacher grow professionally.

2. **Long, Written Evaluations are Equally Effective**: Extensive write-ups on performance may be helpful for a small number of people in an organization, but face-to-face interactions yield the best results when providing feedback.

3. **Simply Tell the Truth**: Being honest and direct when providing feedback is important, but it is most vital that the supervisor promote reflective thinking and create opportunities for the supervisees to discover and internalize their own truths about their performance and identify workable solutions to challenges.

4. **Instructing Rather than Coaching**: In the feedback process, it is relatively easy to instruct or tell individuals how to put their feedback into action, but it is far more productive and sustainable to coach and provide guided practice during the implementation of the feedback.

5. **Timing Doesn't Matter**: Supervisors may conclude that timing around the implementation of feedback is inconsequential, but research suggests that setting a timeline has two advantages: it establishes shared expectations and promotes realistic goal-setting.[xxiv]

The list of misconceptions and errors mentioned above is not intended to be exhaustive but aims to highlight many of the most common mistakes supervisors make in the feedback process.

Key Questions for Instructional Leaders

- How can I leverage my state's evaluation system to provide face-to-face feedback that helps teachers or principals to become more effective?
- What common feedback pitfalls listed above are most difficult for me to avoid?
- As a school or district leader, do I model the feedback process for my colleagues? If so, how well am I modeling the process with respect to receiving *and* providing feedback?
- Who can I ask to give me feedback on my feedback? How do I know what my strengths and opportunities for growth are in giving feedback to teachers or principals?
- Do I have a workable plan for scheduling time for providing feedback? How will I protect that time?
- Have I empowered and delegated authority to my administrators and those with supervisory roles to more effectively execute the feedback process? If so, have I equipped them with the necessary tools to do the work well?

- Does my school have an established set of procedures or a protocol for executing the feedback process?
- Do I have a good gauge of how teachers and leaders in my school feel about the feedback process? What evidence do I have to support my beliefs?
- What systems do I have in place, if any, to assess the effectiveness of the feedback process?

Conclusion

There is no question that providing effective performance feedback can be difficult. Whether it be limited time, an overwhelmed and understaffed administrative team, or the everyday pressures of leading a school, the obstacles and challenges that hinder providing high quality feedback abound. And yet, the importance of feedback cannot be overshadowed by these realities. Like any other organization whose success depends on the skills, knowledge, and performance of its personnel, schools depend on their teachers and leaders to achieve success in the classroom. Feedback is critical to that success, as it ensures that all internal stakeholders understand their organization's expectations and are equipped to meet or exceed those expectations. Similar to high achievement, a rigorous curriculum, or school safety, effective performance feedback must be a nonnegotiable part of a school's culture. The professional growth of teachers and leaders depends on it, but more importantly, student learning and success depend on it.

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[i] Wiggins, G. (2012, September). Seven keys to effective feedback. *Educational Leadership,* 70(1), (para. 4). Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept12/vol70/num01/Seven-Keys-to-Effective-Feedback.aspx

[ii] Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2012). *Leverage leadership: A practical guide to building exceptional schools.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 65.

[iii] University of Indiana. (nd). Retrieved from http://www.indiana.edu/~uhrs/training/ca/feedback.html; Wiggins, (para. 11).

[iv] Hattie, J. & Temperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *The Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.

[v] Fink, S. (2012). *School and district leaders as instructional experts: What we are learning.* Seattle: Center for Educational Leadership, 11.

[vi] Fink, 6.

[vii] DeWitt, P. (2013). Delivering effective feedback…to everyone. EdWeek Blog. Retrieved from http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/finding_common_ground/2013/10/delivering_provide_effective_feedback_to_everyone.html; Jerald, C. (2012). *Leading for effective teaching: How school systems can support principal success.* Seattle: Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 10.

[viii] Jerald, 10.

[ix] DeWitt, 4.

[x] Dewitt, 4.

[xi] DeWitt, 4; Bambrick Santoyo, 63.

[xii] Dewitt, 4.

[xiii] Fink, 2.

[xiv] These questions were inspired by the following citation: Bambrick-Santoyo, 103.

[xv] Drago-Severson, E. (2012). *Helping educators grow: Practices and strategies for leadership development.* Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 115.

[xvi] Cannon, M. D., and Witherspoon, R. (2005). Actionable feedback: Unlocking the power of learning and performance improvement. *The Academy of Management Executive, 19*(2), 122-123.

[xvii] Drago-Severson, 113-16.

[xviii] See Oklahoma TLE, Georgia TKES & LKES, Arkansas LEADS.

[xix] Barge, J. (2013). *The Teacher Keys Effectiveness System Handbook*, 11; Barge, J. (2013). *The Leader Keys Effectiveness System Handbook*, 11.

[xx] Irani, F.S. (2008). Reactions to different levels of personalization of feedback: Moderating effect of individualism. *Journal of Management and Marketing Research, 1*, 104.

[xxi] Bambrick-Santoyo, 78-88.

[xxii] Bambrick-Santoyo, 92.

[xxiii] Bambrick-Santoyo, 61, 79.

[xxiv] Bambrick-Santoyo, 79.

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