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on which we had focused through professional development all year.

In School Leadership That Works, authors Robert Marzano, Brian McNulty, and Timothy Waters describe the results of a meta-analysis of 69 studies that look at school principals’ effect on student academic achievement. Of the 21 responsibilities of school leaders identified to have a positive effect, situational awareness—being aware of issues hiding under the surface and addressing them proactively—had the largest correlation to student achievement.

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Perception Versus Reality
In my third year, I learned that my teachers questioned the authenticity of my positive feedback. I was proud of the notes I propped between the keys of their keyboards before leaving the room. I believed I was building relationships and making it clear how their actions had affected students positively. I worked hard to visit teachers’ classrooms and provide feedback twice a month.

Regardless of my intent, my feedback wasn’t fulfilling its intended purpose—and my situational awareness had failed again. I started to believe instruction wasn’t improving because I wasn’t listening. I felt blindsided, embarrassed, and misunderstood. It was now clear to me that my plan to emerge as an effective instructional leader in just four years wasn’t going to pan out.

But at least my teachers trusted me enough to tell me something they knew would be hard to hear. As a result, I could now address the realities of the situation. While my feedback was falling flat, I could do something about it.

Listen and Learn
By my fourth year, I had finally learned that effective instructional leaders listen—and learn. Here are some of the things I now do to listen and learn:

- Over the summer, I meet with new teachers to find out why they are passionate about education, what type of learner each one is, and how they best process feedback.
- In the fall, I ask teachers about their goals for professional growth, and I keep our focus on those goals throughout the year.
- Each month, I meet with lead teachers to learn about the needs of their grade-level teams and help guide our department’s professional development.
- In the spring, I ask for teachers’ perspectives on our teams, our department, and our school. I use and communicate this information to initiate improvement efforts.

- Even when things seem fine, I find out from the source—the faculty and staff—how it’s going for them, what they need, what’s working, and what isn’t.

Listening can be time-consuming, uncomfortable, confusing, and painful. But over time, you’ll become resilient to the discomfort of listening and accept it as a natural, necessary part of growth.

Listening communicates respect and builds trust, resilience, influence, and situational awareness. Although it comes at a cost, I am convinced that listening to—and being open to influence from—our students, teachers, and families yields more power to transform schools than any checklist ever could.

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