What if your well-intended guidance stifles gifted teaching, rather than encourages it?

By Elise Foster
The research is clear: Teacher quality is the single most important school-based factor in student achievement. However, the equation that guarantees that every student experiences a high-quality teacher in every classroom is ambiguous. School leaders conduct teacher observations as a stop-gap measure to improve instruction and maximize student learning. Teacher response to observations, however, runs the spectrum. Despite principals’ desire to create a constructive, safe environment for teachers to improve their practice, social media posts like this one from a veteran teacher on the morning of his observation are common:

“Tossed and turned all night worrying about my observation at 9.”

To which his friend followed, in an attempt to console,

“I know, I just got mine done and it’s just so involved now. You just want it over!”

More often than not, the evaluation systems intended to ensure world-class teaching create stress that shuts down thinking. Whether you’re being observed for your best-practice teaching or for your formal evaluation cycle, there is an inherent stress in being watched.

We know from current research in cognitive neuroscience what happens to our mental faculties when we are consumed with stress. Stress is triggered by an anxiety-producing encounter, such as a superintendent who shuts down our ideas or criticizes our mistakes in district meetings. We feel exposed and vulnerable and our brain shifts into “fight or flight” mode. We must decide whether to defend our ideas or back down and avoid the wrath of our administrator. Our brain becomes driven by our amygdala, and our neocortex gets neglected. In layman’s terms, when we experience stress, we physiologically get stupid. When leaders create stressful environments, they drop the collective IQ of their staffs.

In *The Multiplier Effect: Tapping the Genius Inside Our Schools* (2014), my co-authors and I call these leaders—those who shut down thinking and drain intelligence—“diminishers.” Conversely, we identify a second type of leader who amplifies intelligence and capability, calling these leaders, “multipliers.” Multipliers are leaders who look beyond their own genius and focus on extracting and extending the genius of others, whereas diminishers never look beyond their own capabilities and often leave more than 50 percent of intellectual and emotional capability of those around them unused. Potentially more harmful is the accidental diminisher: the well-intended leader who often follows
Leaders view their own leadership through the lens of their good intentions, while others perceive that same behavior only by its consequences on them and the students they serve. The educators working to improve teacher practice—coaches, teacher-leaders, and principals—all have the same laudable goal: to positively improve the quality of classroom instruction and empower teachers. But what happens when noble intentions—subtly and without our awareness—stifle the very people we intend to support?

Here are some common ways in which school leaders suppress exceptional teaching, as well as solutions to turn the situation around.

Demystify the Coach’s Role
Instructional coaches thrive on classroom walkthroughs as a way to build relationships and to see how the latest support or new practice is taking hold in the classroom. Walkthroughs offer coaches an opportunity to build trust and remove the “victim” mentality sometimes felt by the teachers they observe. So, when one coach received a principal’s “cease and desist” email, he was stunned. Weeks prior to the evaluation period, that principal caught word that even her best teacher was nervous, and that many teachers felt the red mark of evaluation time is right.

Feel the stress of evaluation time herself, the principal saw the problem and solved it. We call leaders like this, who prize agility and quick turnaround, “rapid responders.” Her intent was noble; she wanted to remove stress so teachers could focus on classroom needs. But what about her coach’s perspective?

Instead of welcoming these “free periods,” the coach felt slighted, wondering if his work was valued. Worse yet, he felt as if this action validated his ideas will spark ideas in others. It is easy to get caught up in seeing “what’s possible.”

Create a Holding Tank
Some coaches and principals worry about overwhelming teachers with too many ideas or being perceived as the “idea guy.” For example, a principal routinely begins staff meetings brimming with new ideas. He doesn’t necessarily think his ideas are exceptional; he simply believes that his ideas will spark ideas in others. It is easy to get caught up in seeing “what’s possible.” Meanwhile, teachers may find the flood of ideas and suggestions to be immobilizing.

What is actually happening? As coaches and principals serve up the strategies du jour, others are intrigued and begin pursuing the ideas, thinking, “Yes, we should introduce manipulatives in math class!” or “Yes, let’s create a schoolwide math council.”

However, as soon as they begin to make progress, another idea flows forth, distracting them and sending them off in a new direction. Each teacher ends up making a millimeter of progress in multiple directions. The great chase halts to a standstill as they realize that they always end up at square one. As they learn to stop acting on the coaches’ strategies, they also stop trying to come up with their own.

It is easy to be seduced into layering on ideas when you see the possibilities. However, it’s more important to find the balance between sharing all the ideas that pop into your head and just enough right-sized, actionable ideas. Before sharing your next idea, you might ask yourself if you want the teacher to act on it right now. If not, put it into a holding tank in your brain or on paper, pulling it out when the time is right.

Resist the Urge to Help
As educators, you undoubtedly want to see others succeed. Your reaction to lend a hand at the first sign of struggle is natural. Your sincere intention is to resolve a problem and help people cross the finish line. Consider the frequent example of a principal stepping in to solve a quick discipline issue during an observation. This act might seem harmless: the student regains focus and now the teacher can demonstrate her teaching practice. We call these leaders “rescuers.”

Rescuers, however, interrupt the natural performance cycle. They starve people of vital learning necessary to be successful. Furthermore,
rescuers create a vexing and all too pervasive performance disconnect, because they deprive people of the feedback that comes from the natural consequences of mistakes. Teachers see undeniable success, while the principal (or coach) sees failure and a gap to step in and close.

You can hardly blame the teachers for this delusion. After all, everywhere they turn, Is are getting dotted and Ts are getting crossed. Their work always crosses the finish line on time, as they are helped by the invisible hand of the rescuer. When leaders play the role of rescuer, they create a cycle of dependency. Teachers who are allowed to make the mistake, on the other hand, have the first-hand experience necessary for the reflection that completes the learning cycle.

When teachers bring you a problem or signal a need for help, ask, “How do you think we should solve it?” They have already run through several possibilities before reaching out, and if they haven’t considered potential solutions, next time they will know better.

Ask Questions
Despite our best efforts to be effective leaders, no one is exempt from accidental diminisher tendencies. This is especially true because these very tendencies often help us earn the right to sit in the principal’s office. Most administrators have been praised for their personal, and often intellectual, merit. They often assume that their role as leader is to have the answers.

A powerful first step toward shedding diminishing tendencies is to stop answering questions and start asking them. This is a difficult transition because we learn at a young age to swiftly answer all questions presented to us. In fact, most administrators will tell you much of their day is spent answering questions from staff, students, and parents. Shifting from giving answers to asking questions is perhaps the most powerful change a leader can make. When you ask big, provocative questions (especially ones for which you don’t know the answer), you shift the burden of thinking to teachers, staff, and students. You might even take this to the extreme by leading your next meeting or conversation by only asking questions. Or more simply, you might begin by asking yourself:

- How might I be shutting down the ideas and actions of others?
- What am I inadvertently doing that might have a diminishing impact on others?
- How might my intentions be interpreted differently by others? What could I do differently?

What brilliance will you uncover when you shift from answers to questions?

Create a Safe Environment
As a principal, you may often find yourself at the whim of state or district mandates—like tying teacher evaluation to pay incentives—that represent someone else’s worthy intention. While you may not control this decision, you do have control over what happens in your building after the decision is handed down. When the next mandate arrives you might ask, “How might this mandate improve instruction?” and, “What messages might my actions convey about this mandate?” Then, use your curiosity to cultivate an environment where everyone—faculty, staff, students, and even district administrators—are able to contribute their best thinking. Once you have everyone’s best thinking, you will be well positioned to improve the quality of instruction in your school.

How might you reconsider your next observation or walkthrough? The difference might be as slight as changing the lens. What if you scanned for and followed clues to identify what each teacher does naturally and freely, instead of where they struggle? Once you find someone’s genius—that thing their brain is wired to do—the possibilities are endless. Or, what if you free your teachers of stress by focusing solely on what the students are doing? Then, it’s not a judgment of their performance but, rather, data collection of student outcomes. Remember, the value of the observation comes in the discussion afterwards about how to multiply teachers’ talent to reach students.

To build organizations at which people can do their best work, principals must create a rapid cycle of thinking, learning, and making and recovering from mistakes. Instructional leaders who stand ready to learn as much as possible from a mistake, rather than standing ready to pounce on the people who make them, are the leaders who have the highest likelihood to improve instruction.

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Elise Foster will deliver a 2-hour session at NAESP’s 2015 annual conference. Visit www.naesp.org/2015 to register.