Principals Coaching Principals

Have you ever sat through an observation and wondered what in the world you could do to improve the instruction taking place? I have. Sometimes it’s because the teacher is so polished that I have difficulty identifying any shortcomings. But sometimes it’s because there are so many things wrong with the lesson that I have no idea where I should begin.

As instructional leaders, we all try to hire the absolute best teacher candidates and many of us feel we have become pretty good at doing this. Of course, once in a while we recognize that a teacher has poor classroom management or a less than desirable disposition with students or adults—or both. With these folks, a strategic improvement plan is in order. But what can we do to help improve the mass of teachers that have classroom management under control and manage to keep parents happy?

As one of four elementary school principals in the Kimberly Area School District of northeastern Wisconsin, I would like to describe a collaborative model that my colleagues and I developed that has helped improve our coaching practices and has paid off in improved teacher capacity.

As a team of principals, we began by collaboratively developing a document to guide our daily work. It consists of a mission statement followed by a list of action statements that we have committed to follow. Three of the most significant statements require us to challenge our own work as well as our teachers’:

- We will coach teachers to improve teaching and learning by creating conversations and providing information, support, resources, modeling, and feedback.
- We will observe in classrooms frequently to gain knowledge of teaching and learning practices and to guide learning improvement efforts.
- We will continue to learn, share, and reflect with teachers and administrators.

“One of the benefits of our shared observation model has...been improved trust...”

According to DuFour (2002), “Schools that function as professional learning communities are always characterized by a collaborative culture. Teacher isolation is replaced with collaborative processes that are deeply embedded into the daily life of the school.”

It would seem that if strong teacher development can be found through collaborative processes, then the same should be true for principals. And so, by reflecting on our action statements and coupling them with what we know about how learning takes place, we were able to create a system of collaborative peer coaching.

Sharing Observations

The practice that we call shared observations has proven for each of us that we can learn a great deal from each other. This is how it works: At the beginning of the school year, we create a schedule in which we each commit to join each other during at least two observations every nine weeks. The protocol for the shared observation is for the building principal to be joined by another principal for a classroom observation. Immediately following the observation, the two principals discuss the lesson, its strengths, its areas of concern, and what the building principal will say to the teacher at the post-observation conference (see box).

During the post-observation conference, usually held within 24 hours, both principals are present. The important message for the teacher, to reduce any anxiety, is to explain that the visiting principal is there simply to observe the building principal. When

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Shared Observation Protocol

**Goal.** In the beginning of the year, it is important to set a goal of how many teachers will be included and how often shared observations will take place.

**Schedule.** At the beginning of each quarter or month, each principal should schedule observations with identified teachers and communicate the scheduled times with colleagues.

**Classroom Observation.** The teacher being observed should always be aware that there will be another principal present during the observation.

**Principal Debriefing.** Immediately following the observation, the two principals meet to discuss the strengths and weaknesses they observed. The building principal then sets a focus for discussion with the teacher during the post-observation conference.

**Post-Observation Conference.** The building principal conducts the conference with the teacher while the visiting principal listens and observes.

**Visiting Principal Feedback.** Immediately following the post-conference with the teacher, the visiting principal gives the building principal feedback related to the content of the conversation that was observed, keeping in mind the focus that was previously decided on.
the teacher and principal conclude their discussion, the teacher leaves and the two principals are left to discuss the visiting principal’s observations during the post-conference.

Certainly there are some issues of concern that must be addressed for this model to be successful, trust being the first and most important. In fact, one of the benefits of our shared observation model has indeed been improved trust between principals, as well as between principals and teachers.

Other Benefits

What are the other benefits to such a plan? Well, from our experience, we have found that shared observations help us use common language and help to build consistency among our buildings as we continue to have conversations about teaching and learning with our teachers. We have also found that in articulating our observations of our peers, we are better able to reflect on our own practices.

Another benefit could be the improved coaching skill that each of us has attained. We also have found that by following the protocol, not only has our trust in each other grown, but so has the trust our teachers have in us.

Recall the first question I asked: Have you ever sat through an observation and wondered what in the world you could do to improve the instruction taking place? After numerous shared observations with my colleagues, I have been able to improve my classroom observation skills by using the firsthand knowledge of people who share my beliefs and perceptions. Peer coaching has given us an opportunity to truly benefit from each other’s strengths.

Reference


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