



Growth Is the Goal

The do's and don'ts of teacher observations and evaluation

By Laurie Barron and Andrew Maxey

For nearly as long as schools have included more than a single teacher, their supervision has been assigned to someone placed in a position of authority—first head teachers, then principals. Although observation of teaching and learning has been part of schools for a long time, it still can do harm to teacher practice, school culture, and by extension, student learning when done inexpertly. We offer the following recommendations based on what has worked for us

and other outstanding leaders—and on some of the pitfalls we've seen in this area of professional practice.

Incorporate These Practices

Provide feedback—and then provide more feedback. The essence of evaluation is professional growth. Although teacher evaluation can morph into a contentious power struggle, evaluation is meant to be descriptive. The idea is simple: Describe the reality of what you see.

When there is space between that and the goal or ideal, set conditions that nurture professional progress going forward. As an administrative supervisor, focus a huge amount of your evaluation time on feedback. Describe what you see in neutral but descriptive language.

Eliminate “gotchas” and surprises.

If evaluation is about professional growth, there is no place for catching folks doing something wrong. Fear can motivate an individual into

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compliance but not to excellence. As a supervisor, you should create a culture in which dialogue about professional practice is a regular and natural part of the school day. In that context, a teacher's struggles don't need to be hidden; you are committed to supporting efforts to grow professionally. When one learns from failures, there's no reason to be afraid of getting caught failing.

Be clear about how it works.

Classroom visits (by adults) should be a normal, healthy part of school. Teachers need to visit one another's classrooms as often as they can in order to learn from and support each other. Administrators need to visit classrooms to interact with students, stay engaged in the school's instructional program, build relationships with staff and students, and provide quality feedback to teachers.

Faculty should agree on the conditions under which other adults can visit a classroom. Ambiguity about who might visit and what their purpose might be can be a source of great anxiety. Make clear which visits will be evaluative, which visitors have the authority to evaluate teachers, whether or not teachers will know of such visits in advance, etc. Transparency is your friend. If you have the guts to address real problems when you find them, teachers can trust that there is no hidden agenda when you address challenging situations.

Build a culture that values growth for everyone. "Failure is not an option" is a well-intentioned mantra we have often misappropriated to create a fear of making mistakes. In the age of accountability via standardized

tests, it is often difficult to nurture an atmosphere in which growth is the goal instead of perfection. As an educational leader, you are positioned to focus observations and the evaluation process on growth. Not only *is* failure an option, but it should also be preferred as a better driver of growth than being right the first time. Let your observations center upon coaching for growth—a recognition of excellence and guidance where improvement is needed.

Visit teachers regularly, and not just for evaluation. If the only time you visit a classroom is for a formal observation, teachers have a right to be suspicious. If you see only a small portion of a teacher's lessons two or three times a year, it can be difficult for a teacher to find those visits and the feedback provided credible and valuable. Informal classroom visits are a great way to learn more about students, teachers, course content, and school culture. Visit regularly, make your visits expected and unsurprising, and use those visits to support teachers when necessary.

Use observations for conversation and reflection. Professional conversations with teachers can stretch the length of the school year. Learn the areas in which each teacher is seeking to grow professionally, and be ready to engage in meaningful conversations with them—even in 30- or 90-second increments when you cross paths in the cafeteria or at the football game. In that context, classroom observation is merely a more formal extension of that ongoing professional conversation. Even when the news isn't great, the trust you have built encourages honesty and helps plan for growth. If the point of the evaluation process is professional growth, the reflective, collaborative conversations that happen around observations will make that goal possible.

Don't

Use only evaluations for personnel decisions. Evaluations should not be used alone to determine whether someone remains employed. If a teacher is not performing well, he or she should know it—and there should be numerous discussions about it—long before a summative evaluation, and the evaluation should not be the method by which an administrator informs the teacher that he or she will not be invited back. Making evaluations into avenues to keep or lose employment sets teachers up to feel unsettled and uncomfortable whenever an administrator visits. Again, visits should focus on feedback and growth. We are fond of saying that students are more than a test score; similarly, teachers are much more than observations and evaluation.


Use results as a threat. Effective leadership requires a culture of trust. Evaluation is a healthy practice when it is used constructively to make the team better by nurturing individual growth. In a culture of trust, getting “caught” making a mistake isn’t a problem. High-performing teams value feedback. Leaders who use the results of evaluation and observations to threaten others miss the point of the process and damage the organization. Specifically, don’t use language to apply pressure regarding observed (or absent) practice; it won’t lead to sustained improvement.

Remember

You can never observe more than a tiny sliver of anyone’s practice. You might think you are an experienced educator who can tell whether or not things are going well “within seconds of entering a classroom.” You are confident of your assessment of that teacher’s practice. You’ve seen her test scores and gotten emails from parents. You’ve observed her three times. But did you stay all day,

even once? Have you observed her at lots of different times and in lots of different circumstances? Have you talked with other administrators who have observed her as well? Good or bad, you should not make decisions based on the confidence that you know much about it. It is better to assume that you have the best information possible—and that it might be wrong—than to be sure about a position that is based on anomalies and coincidences.

The purpose of evaluations should be reflection and growth. Just as teachers provide feedback to students in order to monitor their progress and to inform their own instruction, administrators’ observations and

evaluations of a teacher should do the same for teachers. When teachers look forward to receiving feedback, you have developed a school culture in which growth is valued by everyone. Model the same ideas we do for students: It’s OK to fail, reflection is the expectation, and we will be here to support each other as we learn and grow together. 

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