

Teaching the Change

Use developmental feedback to let employees know when to adjust their behaviors

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

In the September/October 2018 edition of *Principal*, we discussed the importance of feedback to the health of a school. Without feedback, people likely won't know their performance expectations and how they are doing relative to those expectations. Clear, specific, and timely feedback is important to everyone's success.

In NAESP's 2018 survey of new principals, 79 percent reported that feedback can be difficult to provide. This is likely due to the emotional nature of judging others and presenting that judgment in a way that's palatable to the person receiving the feedback. While it is often uncomfortable to provide, studies show that employees crave effective, accurate feedback.

In our book, *Score to Soar: Moving Teachers From Evaluation to Professional Growth* (2015), we recommend giving teachers a balance of reinforcing and developmental feedback to help them understand what they are doing well and what they need to improve. Developmental feedback exists primarily to refine or adjust behavior. It is used when changes need to be made.

Designing Developmental Feedback

In designing and delivering developmental feedback, take the mindset of teaching or explaining a needed change. Instead of just telling someone they need to change, *explain* what you need to see changed and how they can make the changes required.

For developmental feedback to be effective, several elements should be included to ensure that the teacher has the tools to make the recommended or required changes. These

elements are essential, whether the feedback is designed to produce a minor or major change.

- **Specifically describe the behavior/performance issue that needs to be changed.** In order for a teacher or staff member to make

the needed change, they must know what needs to be changed. For example, a statement like "I noticed that at the start of class students are disengaged. Some were distracting others who were trying to get organized" offers direction. Think through your



statement to make sure it focuses on observable behavior and not just your opinion.

- **Share examples of the behavior that needs to be changed.** In some cases, you will want to incorporate examples of undesirable behaviors to illustrate the change's significance. You might say, "I noticed that at the start of class, several students were disengaged. Lynne was walking around and poking her pencil at several students, and


Tom was singing a song to himself." This helps add clarity to the situation and reinforces the issue needing attention.

- **Provide the rationale for the needed change.** Helping the teacher or staff member understand why the behavior needs to change is key; you can't assume he or she knows. In the statement above, you might add, "It's important for you to get the students started on their work as soon as they enter the room. Using this language helps reduce off-task behaviors and starts the class on a positive note."
- **State the new or desired behavior and share examples.** Letting the teacher or staff member know what the new behaviors or expectations are is crucial to their understanding of them. In relation to the examples of off-task student behaviors we shared earlier, you might say, "In the future, I expect you to have an activity for the students to start when they enter the classroom." This statement provides clear direction; a general statement such as "Fix this problem" won't offer the specificity needed to make the change.
- **Make sure the staff member understands expectations for the new behavior.** In order to ensure the issue is addressed, ask open-ended questions to have the teacher or staff member sum up the issues discussed and your expectations. If they can recount what you talked about and the changes expected, you can leave the meeting knowing that your direction was clear and that you should expect a change in behavior.
- **Use whatever tone you need to use to make your feedback effective.** The example questions might seem harsh, but you can

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adjust your tone of voice to take a gentle, inquisitive approach. If you need to sound harsh and judgmental, do so.

- **Circle back to check on and support the change.** With any new behavior, it's important to check on progress. Set a date for a future check-in during the initial meeting in which you set the expectations. Follow-up can include a classroom visit or a formal sit-down conversation; methods and frequency should match the needs of the teacher or staff member. Periodic follow-up helps reinforce the importance of the change and lets the staff member know you take their growth seriously.

Together, reinforcing and developmental feedback let teachers and staff members know what they are doing well and offer ways to continue growth. As you follow the suggestions in our articles and use them on a regular basis, feedback will become easier to deliver—and eventually be a regular part of your teachers' year. 

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