

## **Say YeSSSSS to Collaboration: Transforming Collaborative Mentoring Relationships**

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### **Abstract:**

School administrators frequently find themselves working with personnel unprepared for the dynamics of the schools today. Thus, approaches to meeting the needs of newly hired (in-service or novice) teachers have manifested itself since the 1980s.

As many researchers have indicated, formal evaluation of performance is essential to one's growth and success. It becomes an essential part of the supervisor/worker relationship, but more importantly, it should maintain certain criteria to ensure its success. Evaluation needs to be systematic, with specific criteria, timelines and responsibilities identified for all parties involved, and based on specified job and/or duties assigned.

Evaluation should be presented in a non-threatening manner with opportunity for skill refinement and or change in performance, therefore, the five strategies presented can be applied to different classroom situations novice/beginning teachers may find themselves trying to figure out what to do or points out ways to handle certain teaching situations.

## **Say YeSSSSS to Collaboration: Transforming Collaborative Mentoring Relationships**

School administrators frequently find themselves working with personnel unprepared for the dynamics of the schools today. Thus, approaches to meeting the needs of newly hired (in-service or novice) teachers have manifested itself since the 1980s. Many programs, some driven by newly established state mandates, have impacted the desire to promote higher retention and job performance rates of novice teachers. Higher teacher standards and improved student performance are two areas that should lead to public school improvement (Tucker & Stronge, 2005). Making the shift from a more clinical supervisory model to that of a mentoring, collaborative relationship between novice, veteran teachers and administrators has taken on many forms (Hunling & Resta, 2000).

Unfortunately, not all educational leaders implementing mentoring programs recognize the relevance of veteran mentors deriving some benefit from the mentoring relationship, thus causing a separation between the needs of the novice teacher and those of themselves. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) stated that, "Mentoring would never reach its full potential unless it is guided by a deeper conceptualization that treats it as central to the task of transforming the teaching profession itself."

The focus of this article will examine five specific strategies that can help guide the mentoring/evaluation process, when working with novice teachers. These specific strategies will assist not only the supervisor/administrator, but will assist the novice teachers, as well.

### **Evaluation vs. Supervision**

The need to formally evaluate teachers and staff is multifaceted. The legal obligations of ensuring parents, students, and constituents of the safety and security of the school setting as well as meeting the educational needs of all learners are imperative to any school's success. Building positive relationships with novice and veteran teachers sounds easy, but proves to be more difficult than it seems. Karen Dyer (2001) states, "Relational leadership involves being attuned to and in touch with the intricate web of inter- and intra-relationships that influence an organization." Yet, the research tells us how important teacher effectiveness can not only make students feel better about school and learning, but can positively influence achievement (Tucker & Stronge, 2005).

The age of accountability is also helping drive many school districts' performance criteria. Novice teachers and veteran teachers as well, must climb a very steep and slippery learning curve in order to address district, state, and national mandates driving the curriculums of today. Teachers are being asked to do more with less time, money, and resources, in some cases, have had very little training or guidance from their fellow teachers and/or administrators. Since the introduction of the federal No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001, teachers and school districts are forced to deal with new concepts, such as “adequate yearly progress” and “highly qualified teachers”, which in part, requires that they can demonstrate competence in the subjects they teach (Tucker & Stronge, 2005).

But, consider what novice teachers must undertake, as it relates to effective teaching and decision-making. Like their veteran colleagues, novice teachers not only have to decide what to teach, but more importantly, how to teach. Unfortunately, the emotional intensity and stress novice teachers encounter in the beginning years becomes a daunting task. Novice teachers are quickly overwhelmed with the workload to which they are assigned. Preparing lessons and units around an unfamiliar curriculum, checking and grading student work, responding and corresponding to parents, attending meetings and other district-sponsored functions, all contribute to the struggles many novice teachers face (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006).

A level of performance criteria in which all teachers and students must meet high demands also influences evaluation of teachers. Data is collected in multiple formats and used to make critical decisions driven by allocated support for programs, reductions in state and federal funding, declining enrollments, and testing data, which reflects and compares how students are doing in comparison with the rest of the world.

As many researchers have indicated, formal evaluation of performance is essential to one’s growth and success. It becomes an essential part of the supervisor/worker relationship, but more importantly, it should maintain certain criteria to ensure its success. Evaluation needs to be systematic, with specific criteria, timelines and responsibilities identified for all parties involved. It needs to also be based on specified job and/or duties in which the person(s) are properly trained to perform on a regular basis. Evaluation should also be frequent, especially important in working with beginning or novice teachers. And evaluation should be presented in a non-threatening manner with opportunity for skill refinement and or change in performance. This will force principals to spend more time than ever before in formative supervision roles, nurturing novice teachers (Heller, 2004).

## **Supervisory Concerns**

Defining ways in which we can empower teachers through our interactions and behaviors as leaders in an essential component to bridging the gap between that of evaluator versus mentor. If this shift in the relationship is to occur, supervision needs to consider the effectiveness of the individual; the growth targeted and/or desired, how information and data is to be gathered, and a remediation/enhancement plan that will be implemented with each individual. However, as stated by Darling-Hammond, Bransford, & LePage (2005), “specifying what successful teachers need to know and be able to do is not a simple task.” (p.5)

Five reoccurring themes resonate throughout the research regarding performance

assessments. Through a closer examination of the specific criteria to be considered when evaluating a novice teacher, mentors should consider five specific outcomes related to performance, keeping in mind the role of the mentor teacher is that of consultant, role model, sponsor, and/or facilitator, not evaluator. (See Table 1)

**TABLE 1**

<b>Performance Assessments</b>	<b>Driving Questions</b>
Knowledge Assessments	What do they know? What is the knowledge base?
Reasoning Assessments	Problem-Solving skills? "Thinking on his/her feet?"
Skill Assessments	What skills are necessary to perform the job? Specialized, technical, general?
Product Assessments	What must be produced/achieved? What tangible evidence is needed?
Affective Assessments	What characteristics are related to feelings, emotions, beliefs and/or attitudes? How do these influence performance?

Equally important is the match of mentor and novice teacher. Although this one of the most important aspects mentoring practices, it is often overlooked in relation to the dynamics of proximity, similar relationships with students, like grade levels and mentor teachers who feel comfortable making his/her classroom available for interactions with other fellow teachers. Another type of complaint of first-year teachers is the lack of specific feedback received regarding their work, in particular, during the first few critical months of teaching, not only from their supervisors, but many do not have assigned mentors to assist with the feedback to them.

A bigger issue reflects the declining resources and allocated funds set aside by districts to meet the cost demands for substitute teachers and/or training needed by mentors and/or beginning indoctrination programs for new/novice teachers. Often times, new teachers just need someone to listen to their concerns and to reassure them they are not the first to experience similar situations. Assisting with the transitions to the new district need to have serious considerations made in terms of space, time, resources and support systems in place to ensure a successful transition for both the new and veteran teachers involved. The building leader has to create a positive working atmosphere that not only supports the skills of each mentor and novice teacher, but also create a positive atmosphere (Heller, 2004).

## **The Five S's**

Although we recognize no single or specific way to provide constructive feedback to a novice/beginning teacher, we recognize the value of certain strategies that are more effective than others. These strategies, coincidentally, all begin with the letter 's' and can be applied to different classroom situations novice/beginning teachers may find themselves trying to figure out what to do or points out ways to handle certain teaching situations. We recommend five strategies that have specific applicable moments and are designed to assist both the novice/beginning teacher and the mentor.

### **Silence**

It may be appropriate to do nothing at the time a teacher makes a mistake. Letting the teacher continue as he/she deems fit would be plausible and discuss the situation at a later time. If for example, the teacher makes a mistake regarding a specific fact that is not critical to the lesson, but would be important to point out at a later time (example – a student make a comment relating to the lesson and no follow up was given, a teachable moment was lost), it would be more important to protect the individual from embarrassment and say something later, rather than point it out at that time and break the flow of the lesson. No significant error was made and the learning was not hindered.

### **Side Bar/Suggest**

It may be appropriate at times to jump in with a quick comment or suggestion to the teacher or make the teacher aware of patterns, repetitions, or idiosyncracies the teacher may be overusing. Cues and/or clues may be used to get the teacher's attention without completely disrupting the flow of the lesson. A wrong word or set of directions given, if followed, would lead the students down the wrong path, and by stepping in quickly to point out the problem, much time and re-teaching could be avoided. Side bars can many times be used while students are working independently and teachers are not providing direct instruction.

### **Strategize**

Strategizing with the mentee teacher is truly a "team" aspect, where the mentor will actively participate and help the mentee teacher with the problem and make it a teachable moment. Through this act of partnering, suggestions can be made during the lesson in order to correct the problem, or provide guided suggestions that will allow the mentee teacher the format so continuity in the lesson appears to be seamless and the transitions during the lesson run smoothly. The use of "I" messages would be an example that could be used by the mentor during the lesson presentation and shared with the mentee teacher.

### **Shift**

Breaking the flow of the lesson may be necessary when the teacher is reaching a point of no return when students don't appear to understand the directions or they seem lost with the presentation. When things aren't going well, and a sense of frustration is quickly approaching both the student and mentee, volunteering a guideline, rule, or specific format to be reinforced may be necessary. This shift could be as much as a 24

hour time period, giving the students and mentee time to regroup and try again later. Refocusing the specific task and/or skills necessary for success can be provided with or without the mentee's request, depending on the visual signs in the classroom. Taking a time out to regroup in a basketball game is an expectation of the coach, and can also be applied to the classroom when things are going as planned. Sometimes all that is needed is a "shift" in focus and a new path or approach, rather than reaching the frustration levels of both the instructor and students and losing all that was gained.

### **Step In**

This may appear to be the most drastic in terms of being used, but may save the dignity of the mentee in the long run. This is nothing short of a "rescue mission", where the partner jumps in and finishes the task. Rather than reaching a breaking point, the mentor recognizes things aren't going well, or that students are out of control and have reached the "point of no return." In order for the lesson to be salvaged, the mentor does not allow the mentee to finish what was started and little dialogue between the mentor and mentee takes place in front of the students. It seems unnecessary to ever allow a mentee an opportunity to reach the "breaking point" while learning to teach effectively. If such an opportunity presents itself, we feel it is better to provide a lifesaver rather than an anchor.

The following scenario can be used as an illustration of what skills and/or strategies could be applied:

### ***Teaching Situation***

A young adult special needs student has been given a task to figure a monthly budget, a difficult concept for this individual. The person has significant short and long-term memory deficits, and also has agonizingly slow processing skills. The approach of the instructor chose to use was very abstract and required thinking strategies far beyond her grasp.

As the instructor became more nervous about the skills being taught, she began to speed up her presentation of the information necessary to cover, and her voice and actions became busied and disconnected. In an attempt to camouflage her growing concern, she did not put the individual at ease; rather she failed to pick up on the verbal and visual clues being given by the young adult, and continued to "talk over" her in an attempt to get through the lesson. The evaluator could tell the lesson was going from bad to worse and knew the individual was going to need several concrete examples to understand the new concepts being presented.

### **Summary**

Not only do administrators need additional skills for instructing adults, but they also must revise their perspective of supervision and evaluation. Mentoring often results in instruction being delivered in unique settings, with new techniques, or in a shared

delivery pattern. Traditional perspectives of supervision and evaluation may be inadequate in measuring the work of both the mentor and novice teacher. Additionally, administrators and mentors may not be clear as to who has full responsibility for evaluation of the novice teacher or how evaluation of mentoring skills is interpreted in the full assessment of a teacher.

This revised perspective of education, which includes a more collaborative approach, requires that administrators must be able to demonstrate competence in personnel management. The giving of meaningful feedback is essential in helping both mentors and novice teachers be successful. Not only must administrators strive for clearer articulation of job descriptions to aid in evaluation and supervision, they must also work for a joint understanding of appropriate roles for themselves and mentors.



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