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Listen carefully

Good communication skills build relationships that foster school improvement

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

AS AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL leads a staff meeting, he says that he believes all students in this school are capable of learning at high levels. Then he invites comments from the staff.

A 2nd-grade teacher raises her hand and says, “I’ve been teaching for a dozen years and I know that some children will never be able to learn what others are able to learn. Some children just don’t have the home lives, the innate intellectual ability, or even the desire to learn as much as other children.”

The principal, visibly red in the face, says, “That is a really unprofessional attitude. That is not the attitude a teacher should have in this school.”

OR

The principal says, “I want to learn more about your views. You’ve had a lot of experience as a teacher in this building and in this district. Tell us more about why you believe as you do.”

Which response from the principal is most likely to keep this conversation going? Which response is most likely to encourage other teachers to speak up and share their points of view? Which response is most likely to shut down honest exchanges between teachers and principal?

This sort of exchange between a principal and a teacher — particularly when it occurs in full view of an entire school staff — is at the heart of the relationships that these individuals will have with each other.

The quality of these relationships is key to a staff’s ability to work with each other and achieve the kind of sustained collaboration necessary to do the hard work of school improvement.

“We talk a lot about the importance of a productive school culture. But it’s the social

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Good communication skills build relationships

Continued from Page One

relationships between people in schools that form that culture. A high-performing culture is ultimately about the quality of those relationships,” says Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council.

Sparks is not the only educator concerned about relationships in schools. In his newest book, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), Michael Fullan calls relationships “Job Two.” Relationships have even become the focus of serious research: University of Chicago researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider have examined the role of social relationships in Chicago public schools and concluded that schools with a high degree of “relational trust” are far more likely to make the kinds of changes that help raise student achievement than those where such relations are low, according to a recent article in the *Harvard Education Letter* (July/August 2002). In an unrelated story out of Chicago, the magazine *Catalyst* reported that a highly touted professional development effort at the city’s Manley High School failed largely because of lack of trust and poor relationships among key players in the effort.

Although he’s been working in this area for many years, Robert Garmston will quickly admit that it’s difficult to sell school staff members on the value of paying more attention to their relationships with each other. “Our experience is that people are so busy and their plates are so full that asking them to pay attention to the ways they communicate is just a crazy maker,” Garmston says.

He recommends that principals begin such work by laying out the rationale for such an emphasis. Introduce staffs, he says, to the professional learning communities work of Karen Seashore Louis and to the more recent research from Chicago.

Focusing on the conversations teachers and principals have with each other is the starting point for this work, say both Garmston and Sparks. But improving the quality of conversations among staff mem-

Learn new skills

LISTEN FULLY

Because communication is a two-way street, it doesn’t happen unless the intended message is received. While great amounts of time are devoted to being an excellent speaker or writer, relatively little time is devoted to learning how to be a good receiver.

Sparks says effective listeners just focus on listening carefully without devoting part of their attention to what they will say next. See the tool on Page 3 for an activity that will help your group practice this strategy.

PARAPHRASE

Garmston draws a clear distinction between the practice of paraphrasing and the “effective listening” of several decades ago.

The effective listening strategy (“I hear what you’re saying”) took the emphasis off the speaker and placed it on the listener, he says. In the paraphrasing that he recommends, the emphasis remains with the speaker.

In the example at the beginning of this article, the principal paraphrased the statement of the teacher by capturing the essence of her message and then asking for more information.

Garmston and his colleague Bruce Wellman describe three types of paraphrasing in their book, *The Adaptive School*. Review those types on Page 6 of this issue.

AVOID OBLIGATORY LANGUAGE

Spark recommends paying close attention to obligatory words that you use in both verbal and written conversations. For example, how many times today will you say or write a sentence that includes these words?:

- You must ...
- You ought to ...
- You should ...
- You have to ...
- You need ...

“If someone is ‘shoulding’ us, we may feel coerced and patronized. Shoulds ask us to live out the values and intentions of others as if there is only one right way to do something. In the process, we lose our voice and vitality, which is ultimately destructive to the relationships we’re trying to build,” Sparks says.

bers cannot be done in isolation, they say. Although some time must be spent learning new skills, those new skills can quickly be put to use in the context of a school’s regular work, such as staff meetings, team meetings, and curriculum committees.

“You work on the culture and the relationships simultaneously with the other work that you’re doing,” Sparks says.

One place a school staff might begin is by taking the inventory offered on Pages 4 and 5. Garmston uses this tool as a way

for staff members to kick off a discussion about the way they communicate with each other and to identify the skills they want to focus on. Garmston’s book, *The Adaptive School* (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), provides substantial background for further work in this area.

Once a staff identifies skills it wants to improve, Garmston recommends a regular reminder at the start of each meeting and a check-in at the end of each meeting to gauge the group’s progress.

Listen Fully

Purpose: This exercise helps individuals practice how to slow down and listen. In this exercise, participants will experience what it means to listen fully to another person and to be listened to fully.

Time: If you're reading an article during this activity, allow at least 45 minutes. Allow each speaker two minutes to speak on each topic. The facilitator may want to limit the experience to one topic or explore several topics and switch speaking and listening partners for each topic.

Materials: Copies of articles to be read by participants, 3x5 cards, marker.

Possible topics for this exercise

- What I like best about myself as a teacher.
- Why I became a teacher.
- Why I continue to teach.
- Why I chose to teach the subject and grade level that I'm teaching today.
- What my students are capable of learning.

Directions

1. Do a jigsaw reading of Chapter 7 of *Falling Awake* or select another article or book chapter that also describes the qualities of listening completely. (See the Dec/Jan. 2002 issue of *Tools for Schools* for directions on a jigsaw reading.) *Time: 20 minutes.*
2. Invite participants to share the attributes of listening fully that they have gleaned from this article or chapter. *Time: 10 minutes.*
3. Identify the topic for this exercise.
4. Ask participants to select a partner. Distribute 3x5 cards labeled "sender" and "receiver" to each pair.
5. The person with the "sender" card speaks first. While the "sender" speaks, the "receiver" listens completely. The "receiver" does not speak or make any noises in response to what s/he is hearing. *Time: 2 minutes.*
6. Next, have the partners trade cards, switch roles, and continue on the same topic. *Time: 2 minutes.*
7. After completing this exercise, the facilitator invites participants to reflect out loud about the experience. *How did they feel while speaking? How did they feel when listening? What did they learn about themselves as speakers and listeners?*

"Why is being heard so healing? I don't know the full answer to that question but I do know it has something to do with the fact that listening creates relationship. ... Listening moves us closer, it helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy. Not listening causes fragmentation and fragmentation always causes more suffering."

— Margaret Wheatley,
Turning to One Another

Adapted from Falling Awake: Creating the Life of Your Dreams, by Dave Ellis, Breakthrough Enterprises, 1999. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm.

Measuring Collaborative Norms

Purpose: To surface staff or team members' awareness of the group's use of collaborative norms and to assist staff and team to identify areas in which the staff or team wants to focus.

Time: 20 minutes to take the inventory; 30 minutes to discuss findings.

Directions

1. Make enough copies of the inventory (pages 4 and 5) to allow each member to have his or her own copy.
2. Organize a large group into smaller groups of three persons each. Ask each group of three to rate the larger group's adherence to each norm from low to high. *Time: 20 minutes.*
3. At the conclusion, reassemble the larger group and invite one person from each small group to report out the responses. *Time: 30 minutes.*
4. Using the same scale, mark each group's response on a poster-size piece of paper.
5. Identify norms where the groups scored the lowest.
6. Invite the group to develop a plan to improve its abilities in those areas.

I. Pausing

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Pausing before responding or asking a question allows time for thinking and enhances dialogue, discussion, and decision making.

- Listens attentively to others' ideas with mind and body.
- Allows time for thought after asking question or making a response.
- Rewords in own mind what others are saying to further understand their communication.
- Waits until others have finished before entering the conversation.

2. Paraphrasing

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Using a paraphrase starter that is comfortable for you such as "So" Or "As you are" or "You're thinking" and following the starter with a paraphrase assists members of a group to hear and understand each other as they formulate decisions.

- Uses paraphrases that acknowledge and clarify content and emotions.
- Uses paraphrases that summarize and organize.
- Uses paraphrases that shift a conversation to different levels of abstraction.
- Uses nonverbal communication in paraphrasing.

3. Probing

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Using gentle open-ended probes or inquiries such as "Please say more" or "I'm curious about" Or "I'd like to hear more about" Or "Then you are saying" Increases the clarity and precision of the group's thinking.

- Seeks agreement on what words mean.
- Asks questions to clarify facts, ideas, stories.
- Asks questions to clarify explanations, implications, consequences.
- Asks questions to surface assumptions, points of view, beliefs, values.

Measuring Collaborative Norms *continued from page 4*

4. Putting ideas on the table

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Ideas are the heart of a meaningful dialogue. Label the intention of your comments. For example, you might say, “Here is one idea ...” or “One thought I have is ...” or “Here is a possible approach.”

- States intention of communication.
- Reveals all relevant information.
- Considers intended communication for relevance and appropriateness before speaking.
- Provides facts, inferences, ideas, opinions, suggestions.
- Explains reasons behind statements, questions, and actions.
- Removes or announces the modification of own ideas, opinions, points of view.

5. Paying attention to self and others

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Meaningful dialogue is facilitated when each group member is conscious of self and of others and is aware of not only what s/he is saying but also how it is said and how others are responding. This includes paying attention to learning style when planning for, facilitating and participating in group meetings. Responding to others in their own language forms is one manifestation of this norm.

- Maintains awareness of own thoughts and feelings while having them.
- Maintains awareness of others’ voice patterns, nonverbal communications, and use of physical space.
- Maintains awareness of group’s task, mood, and relevance of own and others’ contributions.

6. Presuming positive presuppositions

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Assuming that others’ intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and eliminates unintentional put-downs. Using positive presuppositions in your speech is one manifestation of this norm.

- Acts as if others mean well.
- Restrains impulsivity triggered by own emotional responses.
- Uses positive presuppositions when responding to and inquiring of others.

7. Pursuing a balance between advocacy and inquiry

⇐ Low  High ⇒

THE NORM: Pursuing and maintaining a balance between advocating a position and inquiring about one’s own and others’ positions assists the group to become a learning organization.

- Advocates for own ideas and inquires into the ideas of others.
- Acts to provide equitable opportunities for participation.
- Presents rationale for positions, including assumptions, facts, and feelings.
- Disagrees respectfully and openly with ideas and offers rationale for disagreement.
- Inquires of others about their reasons for reaching and occupying a position.

Source: The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups, by Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman. Christopher-Gordon, 1999. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm.

Three Forms of Paraphrasing

Acknowledge/clarify

A brief statement reflecting what was said in the listener's words.

You're concerned about _____.

■ You would like to see _____.

■ You're pleased with _____.

■ You're feeling badly about _____.

■ You're trying to figure out _____.

■ You know it can be _____.

Summarize/Organize

A statement illuminating themes or containers.

■ You have two goals here; one is _____ and the other is _____.

■ So, on the one hand _____, on the other hand _____.

■ There seem to be three themes: 1) _____, 2) _____, and 3) _____.

■ So we have a hierarchy of ideas here. It is _____.

Shift/conceptual focus

A statement reflecting ideas at a logical level difference.

■ So a _____ here is _____.

■ So a value here is _____.

■ So an assumption here is _____.

■ So a goal here is _____.

■ So a belief here is _____.

■ So a concept here is _____.

■ So an intention here is _____.

■ So a perspective here is _____.

“There is no more

powerful way to

initiate significant

change than to

convene a

conversation. When a

community of people

discovers that they

share a concern,

change begins. There is

no power equal to a

community discovering

what it cares about.”

— Margaret Wheatley,

Turning to One Another

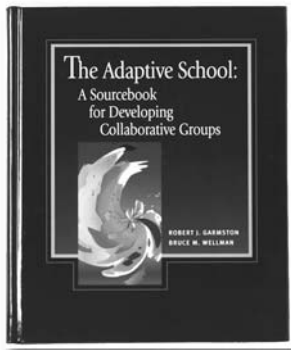
Source: The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups, by Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman. Christopher-Gordon, 1999. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsdco.org/bookstore.htm.

Resources

The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups

Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman, Christopher-Gordon, 1999.

Develops individual talent and energy with an eye towards working with others in a school context. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Item B80. Price: \$71.25, non-members; \$57, members.



Falling Awake: Creating the Life of Your Dreams

Dave Ellis. Breakthrough Enterprises, 2000.

Shares 12 major success strategies — including listening fully and choosing your conversations — that will enhance your interpersonal relationships. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Item B117. Price: \$31.00, non-members; \$24.80, members.

“Fuel for Reform: The Importance of Trust in Changing Schools”

David Gordon, *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2002 (Vol. 18, No. 4).

Describes discoveries made by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider during their decade-long study of the Chicago reform efforts. Available online at www.edletter.org.

How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work

Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey. Jossey-Bass, 2000.

Intensely practical book about how to create and sustain changes in the workplace. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Item B135. Price: \$32.00, non-members; \$25.60, members.

Leading in a Culture of Change

Michael Fullan. Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Draws on the most current ideas about leadership. Includes a chapter on “Relationships, relationships, relationships” which describes the quality of personal relationships as “Job Two” in any organization. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Item B167. Price: \$31.25, non-members; \$25, members.

The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation

Daniel Yankelovich. Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Reinvents the art of dialogue which, when practiced correctly, will align people with a shared vision and help them realize their full potential as individuals and as a team. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Item B172. Price: \$16.25, non-members; \$13, members.

“Seen as a Model, Manley Plan Falls Short”

Elizabeth Duffrin. *Catalyst*, June 2002 (Vol. 13, No. 9).

Tells the story of Chicago’s Manley High School where poor relationships among staff members played a key role in the school’s inability to achieve success. Available online at www.catalyst-chicago.org.

Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future

Margaret Wheatley. Berrett-Koehler, 2002.

Explores the power of conversation to create real change. Wheatley defines the necessary conditions for supporting real, meaningful dialogue that makes change possible, offers points for reflection and presents questions that are “conversation starters.” Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm. Item B203. Price: \$20, non-members; \$16, members.

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