

WHAT TO DO ABOUT JIM?

PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUE TURNS
DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS
INTO GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

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Here is a common scenario: The kids love Jim and so do his peers. He's one of those teachers who lights up the room with his huge personality, and he's always good for a laugh. In fact, you can't help laughing along with Jim when he gets the room going.

Jim's best quality is that he possesses great soft skills and is a good communicator. He is agreeable, willing to serve on committees, and quite pleasant. There isn't a staff member in the school who wouldn't go to bat for Jim — not a custodian, cafeteria worker, or fellow teacher. Last year, when Jim's father died, the funeral parlor was packed with colleagues to support his loss, not because they knew Jim's dad but because everyone loves Jim.

Jim can ace the interview, too. There isn't a principal in her right mind who wouldn't hire Jim after an interview, and even though he could move to a neighboring district to make more





**Mediocre
teacher**

**Great staff
member**

Well-liked

**Shallow
content-area
skills**

money, he's committed to the students, teachers, and the principal of his school, Sharon.

The truth is, though, Jim lacks some of the specific skills needed in the classroom to support student learning. He'll certainly be nominated as the teacher of year as he has year after year at his school, but mostly by peers who haven't seen him teach or haven't really dug into his student learning outcomes.

As principal, Sharon knows he can grow and develop as a teacher, but she is hesitant to have a direct conversation with him, even though it could improve his performance. Why? Although Jim is mediocre in the classroom, he is a great staff member and well-liked by all, and Sharon's afraid of the ripple effect it might cause in staff morale.

A tough conversation that mentions the need to improve or even the threat of potentially putting Jim on a performance plan could crush his morale. Furthermore, if Jim decided to share what was happening with other teachers, the result of his being put on a plan, coupled with Jim's popularity, could have a negative impact on the school community as a whole.

This leaves Sharon at a crossroads. As Sharon listens to Jim's professional learning community (PLC) at work, she is perplexed on how to move forward, yet she's confident on what needs to be addressed.

The problem is Jim's hard skills. His technical prowess and depth of

knowledge within his content area are limited. When it comes time for problem solving and analysis of complex issues, Jim falls short. However, the job requires both kinds of skills — the soft and the hard skills are equally important.

Jim's PLC is focused on using evidenced-based strategies to close the 9th-grade achievement gap in math, and Jim's classes are performing the lowest within the department. Sharon is convinced that Jim's moderate outcomes are due to his strong teacher-student relationship and not his pedagogical skills, which she cares so much to improve, but shudders to think about what she might say and how she might say it.

Even though the evidence to intervene with Jim is there, Sharon remains hesitant. She's left to balance the culture of the organization with Jim's (and others') need for improvement. Despite the possible drawbacks, Sharon decides to take the first step with Jim — having a conversation and laying out the strengths and weaknesses of Jim's performance and how she believes they can work together to improve his ability.

Sharon believes in transparency and has pushed professional dialogue among her teachers. Now she decides to exercise her own practices with her staff. She likes Jim and knows that if he accepts her feedback, he can improve.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

The reality is that professional dialogue centered on improving someone's performance is challenging. Educators too often avoid difficult conversations due to the unpredictable manner in how the message will be received, the potential strain on the relationship, and also the technical clarity necessary to lead the conversation.

The idea of conversations around performance reviews, and even more challenging improvement plans, is daunting. Even though the goal is to improve the employee's performance, difficult conversations don't automatically stimulate an environment and culture of continual growth.

Establishing and systematizing professional dialogue in the workplace transforms the difficulty and complexity of such conversations and creates manageable, meaningful, and growth-oriented opportunities. Through ensuring clarity of goals within the organization, candid two-way feedback, and cycles of reflection, professional dialogue is a dynamic aspect of the culture and is appreciated and expected when it's part of the fabric of the organization.

When it's not integrated into the basic structures of management, it can be hard to introduce. But there are three important aspects of professional dialogue that school leaders can employ for implementing and sustaining a successful model.

CLARIFY GOALS

There are three predominant strategies that Sharon can use to approach her difficult conversation with Jim. The first centers on depersonalizing the situation for both Jim and Sharon and ensuring there is clarity around the mission, goals, and values of the school.

Clarifying the purpose of the work is vital to effective professional dialogue. The purpose of the work — mission,

goals, and values — should be integrated into every conversation regarding performance. Professional conversations about the organization's mission, goals, and values provide clarity without making the feedback personal.

Jim's classes are underperforming. The school has specific targets that Jim's students are not on track to meet. As a result, a conversation is not only warranted, it should be expected. The key is to focus on the students' performance and not Jim's, at least at first. Ultimately, this may translate into changes Jim needs to make with his instruction, but the first step within the professional conversation should rest on Jim's students.

This doesn't suggest that Jim will automatically be willing to change or be open to ideas on how to move his students forward. In fact, Sharon should expect resistance; however, even amid the resistance, the challenge and the fact remain the same — that Jim's students need to improve and Jim is in the best position to help them.

Maintaining the students' performance as the central argument allows Sharon to open the conversation with a focus on them and their needs. The conversation becomes about how Jim can help them and what is necessary, not on what Jim is not doing or doing wrong.

Take caution, though. With this approach, it is critical not to be too impersonal, which can happen when the conversation shifts too far into a discussion regarding goals and values and the organization's responsibility. The conversation about expectations and personal accountability for growth and improvement should center on goals and values to include personal ownership.

The goals and values are simply the backdrop for the feedback concerning an individual's personal actions. The backdrop, or model, makes the conversation about

performance more objective, pointing out deficiencies based on predefined organizational norms. Professional conversations, especially when it comes to improvement strategies for individual performance, have to be based on a clear purpose or there's a risk in offending hardworking people. Working hard and being effective at reaching goals are two different things, and that needs to be made clear through professional dialogue.

REFLECTION #1:

Are your organization's goals clear enough to use in a conversation regarding performance?

CANDID FEEDBACK

The second strategy Sharon can use is candid, two-way, and ongoing communication. Professional dialogue that is infrequent, unstructured, or random is ineffective. James Baron, William S. Beinecke Professor of Management at Yale School of Management, says "You're giving a tremendous amount of real-time feedback, and your employees are people you know well. Hopefully your relationship can survive candid feedback" (Knight, 2011).

Sharon, as the principal and instructional leader, needs to be able to guide Jim. Having specific feedback on how and what Jim can do to help his students succeed is critical. Specific feedback is candid by nature because flowery feedback that doesn't cut to the chase can be misleading and ambiguous. That won't help to manage change, which is the reason to give the feedback in the first place.

Additionally, good professional dialogue is two-way. The word dialogue means exchange. The exchange needs to be established in a system that is continuous and systematic. Jim should have the opportunity to provide feedback not only on Sharon's

recommendations, but the situation as a whole. Again, Sharon needs to be mindful of defensive responses or hesitation, which are common.

However, back-and-forth dialogue is important for creating an atmosphere where 360-degree feedback is valued by all. In addition, if there is true two-way conversation, this not only helps with the relationship, it also creates greater levels of accountability for both Sharon and Jim. Finally, Sharon's first encounter with the conversation about student performance has to be only one of several ongoing exchanges regarding the improvements that must happen over time.

REFLECTION #2:

Is your feedback specific, candid, two-way, and ongoing?

REFLECT AND REVIEW (THE TWO R'S)

The third strategy Sharon can employ is to use the two R's: reflect and review. Reflection and review are what make the professional dialogue process worthwhile for both parties. Ensuring that the goals of the organization are clear and providing candid feedback are powerful, but are incomplete without the two R's.

This process is critical for Jim and Sharon, both together and as individuals. Together, Jim and Sharon can focus on the particular areas and reflect on what is working and so on. Jim's own personal reflection on his skills will help him understand the growth that he needs to achieve and how that growth is tied to his students' successes.

Sharon is growing as a leader, too, and reflecting on the conversations with her teacher deepens her understanding of herself, her employees, and the most appropriate methods to discuss change. The two R's are powerful and too often overlooked. Forward momentum is



always the goal, growing and improving performance over time, which requires a longitudinal approach.

Reviewing feedback, past and present, helps ensure that the message is delivered with improved clarity each time. Noting what was clear and candid from a present scenario helps to identify what needs clarity next time. Quality feedback and a willingness to get better work together to build trust, which allows professional dialogue to drive success in the right environment.

If Sharon expects others to improve their practices over time, based on her feedback, she better have an expectation for herself that her feedback improves over time as well.

REFLECTION #3:

Have you given yourself time to reflect on your practices, including the feedback you give to others for them to improve?

CLEAR COMMUNICATION IS VITAL

Professional dialogue is daunting. However, clear communication is vital to overall success. Schools are constantly implementing new initiatives, many proven to be successful, but they lose effectiveness when not supported by clear professional dialogue and feedback cycles during implementation. Although challenging, an environment that communicates and reinforces overall expectations will have greater success.

All three professional dialogue elements are necessary, and failing to use all three will create substandard results. For example, even if Sharon worked with Jim and was very clear and direct with him regarding his need to grow (candor) but failed to be clear on how the deficiencies are adversely impacting the organization's goals (clarity), Sharon risks Jim not seeing the overall purpose and mission. Ensuring that Jim sees the big picture not only for himself, but also for the organization, is vital to her feedback having any impact.

Or, let's imagine that Sharon does the first two well (clarity and candor) — Jim is clear on the purpose, and Sharon's feedback has been very candid — but Sharon doesn't take time to reflect on the results. Subsequently, Jim's growth may potentially wane over time and, worse yet, Sharon may not know what aspects of the training plan actually paid off.

As Sharon works with Jim, using all three elements of professional dialogue, Jim's classroom practices are sure to improve, yielding the results necessary for his students to grow, which is every school's ultimate goal.

REFERENCE

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