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Lifting All Leaders

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Go and See: The Key to Improving Teaching and Leading

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Making a daily practice of visiting classrooms, observing briefly, and talking with teachers has the greatest potential to improve student learning, help professionals grow, and help schools become more effective learning organizations.

I've come to this conclusion by studying an unlikely role model: Toyota. At Toyota, continuous improvement and employee development happen primarily through interactions between mentors and mentees—employees and their supervisors—on the factory floor or wherever the work is being done. We might assume that leadership in a manufacturing company would be rigidly top-down, numbers-driven, and directive toward frontline staff. But Toyota's focus on conversation is precisely what sets it apart from its competitors.

Adopting a "go and see" philosophy, Toyota supervisors are prohibited from making decisions from afar based on reports and data. Instead, they're expected to go and talk with the people doing the work. Because these conversations take place on the factory floor rather than in the manager's office, they're based on firsthand, real-time observations of the work being done. As Mike Rother (2009) explains in his book *Toyota Kata: Managing People for Improvement, Adaptiveness, and Superior Results*, everyone in the company is taught to improve product quality by engaging in rapid cycles of inquiry—an interactive process between supervisors and employees at all levels of the organization.

Contrast this approach with our typical system for accountability and professional growth in schools:

Teachers set annual goals based on student performance, which are vetted by administrators.

Administrators conduct formal observations, meeting in their offices with teachers for pre- and post-observation discussions.

Conversations about teaching tend to focus on ratings and directive feedback, with the administrator doing most of the talking.

Decisions about student intervention and teacher professional development are made based on data and reports, with hardly any firsthand observation.

Under this approach, instructional leaders obtain little real-time information on which to base improvement decisions. Administrators may conduct occasional walkthroughs to collect data, provide feedback, make an appearance, and generally keep teachers on their toes, but without conversation, these visits fail to generate learning for individuals or the organization. So if a much simpler approach—face-to-face conversation—has so much potential to improve leadership and organizational performance, then why hasn't it caught on in schools?

In short, because we're too focused on directive feedback.

The Danger of Directive Feedback

In the education profession, we hold feedback in high regard—although what constitutes feedback can vary widely. In most cases, it includes suggestions made by instructional leaders, which teachers are expected to implement or at least consider. For example, in his book *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools*, Paul Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) describes how a principal, Julie, provides feedback to teachers in weekly 15-minute meetings based on 15-minute observations: "At each feedback meeting, Julie offers direct, readily applicable feedback. The next week, she checks that her feedback has been put in place and looks for further areas for improvement, building a veritable cycle of improvement" (p. 64).

Toyota, in contrast, discourages its mentors from providing this type of feedback, which it sees as a hindrance to the mentee's growth and to discovering the true nature of needed improvements. Suggestions, which Toyota calls *countermeasures*, are inappropriate before the mentee has pinpointed the issue. The mentor is present and fully engaged, but only to guide the mentee—not provide a solution.

What if we approached school improvement and professional growth like Toyota, by treating inquiry-driven conversation as the best way to improve performance? What if we trained school leaders to treat observations not as opportunities for directive feedback, but as chances to "go and see" and engage in conversation with teachers?

It might seem impossible that a manufacturing company could have a more effective approach to professional and organizational learning than schools, which are ostensibly learning organizations. But Toyota's culture and results speak for themselves. By engaging in continuous improvement for more than 60 years, Toyota has established itself as the world's quality leader not just in manufacturing, but also across all sectors. How might a "go and see" approach to instructional leadership work in schools?

From Firsthand Evidence to Better Decisions

Classroom conversations facilitate professional and organizational learning for a straightforward and obvious reason: they allow us to make sense of what's taking place and to make rapid decisions to improve conditions for teaching and learning.

For example, if Sam, an administrator, spends a few minutes observing Carol's math class, he might notice that students seem confused during her explanation of how to solve a new type of problem. In a typical walkthrough, Sam might leave Carol a note with a few reflective questions such as, "What are some ways you could ensure that students understand your explanations so that you can identify their misconceptions?"

Or if it's a formal observation, Sam might meet with Carol afterward and ask her to justify her approach to the lesson. He might then provide directive feedback on reducing students' confusion.

But what if Sam adopts a simpler approach and asks Carol how the lesson went relative to her plans? He might discover that she intended for students to struggle a bit with the new problem type in small groups, as a formative assessment before teaching a new algorithm. Or he might discover that Carol didn't think students were confused at all. Without knowing Carol's intentions for the lesson, and inquiring about her perceptions of its success, Sam is likely to provide unhelpful or even insulting feedback.

Teacher evaluation expert Charlotte Danielson (2015), in her book *Talk About Teaching! Leading Professional Conversations*, explains that conversation is powerful because—unlike directive feedback—it hinges on teachers' understanding as much as their actions:

When educators recognize that for teachers to advance in their understanding, they must be the ones to engage in the work of self-assessment and reflection on practice, then external feedback is even seen as a possible hindrance to that process. (p. 10)

In a complex environment, determining the facts on the ground is a crucial first step. Before we can make improvement decisions, we must ascertain what's currently taking place, then decide what it means. As outside observers, instructional leaders often lack the context they need to make meaning of what they see. Teachers have deep knowledge about what and how their students have been learning, but they may miss many nuances of student interaction that an outside observer may notice. Conversation can bridge these gaps in knowledge and lead to deeper understanding—and, ultimately, better decisions that result in improvement.

Why can't directive feedback produce the same level of improvement? I believe it can help teachers move from bad to good, but not from good to great. Achieving excellence in teaching requires that teachers themselves take professional responsibility for their teaching decisions and their growth. Too many instructional leaders go to great lengths to provide high-quality directive feedback, yet fail to recognize this fundamental fact. It's not enough for teachers to improve only in response to directive feedback; continuous improvement, as its name implies, should happen all the time.

W. Edwards Deming (1986), known as the father of the quality movement in Japan and the United States, believed that quality is the result of systems more than exceptional individuals, noting in his book *Out of the Crisis* that "in my experience most troubles and most possibilities for improvement add up to the proportions something like this: 94 percent belong to the system" (p. 315).

Although student learning may depend to a greater degree on the quality of individual teachers, only by engaging in organizational learning can schools build the capacity to meet their students' needs. Treating individual teachers as problems to be fixed with corrective feedback robs our schools of the improvement potential of conversation-based learning.

What "Go and See" Conversations Look Like in Practice

Powerful classroom conversations begin with *noticing*. Instructional leaders can be more than a sounding board; they can be key sources of insight if they're willing to go and see the work being done firsthand.

For example, Sam might begin a conversation with Carol by saying, "It seemed to me, from the looks on their faces, that students were pretty confused while you were demonstrating how to solve the new type of problem. What was your take, and how did that compare with your expectations when you planned the lesson?"

Sam not only shares his perception of what took place, but also asks for Carol's perspective on the situation. Then, he asks how that compares with her intent for the lesson—a consideration that's often missing from directive feedback. After clarifying the situation, Carol and Sam can discuss ideas for improvement.

What could Sam learn from this conversation? First, he will learn how Carol thinks about the issues they discuss. Second, he may gain insight into effective teaching strategies that Carol shares with him, which he may be able to share with other teachers. Third, he may identify issues that need to be addressed at the school level—for example, if Carol pinpoints school activities that are causing students to miss class. And finally, he may identify areas in which Carol could benefit from additional professional development or training.

What might Carol learn from this conversation? She may gain both greater insight into how students experienced the lesson and valuable ideas about how to improve her practice. She'll also learn to use Sam's approach to inquiry independently.

But it's also possible that she'll learn little from her conversation with Sam, especially if she's a highly skilled, experienced teacher. This is a positive outcome because what Carol shares with Sam can result in *organizational*

learning. Sam can help transfer Carol's expertise to other teachers, and he'll be able to make better-informed school leadership decisions. In the worst-case scenario, Carol makes a good impression on Sam and goes on with her day.

In contrast, if Sam had approached Carol with traditional top-down feedback, the potential for harm would have been much greater, and the potential for learning would have been much lower. Directive feedback is only effective if the instructional leader both correctly diagnoses the situation and prescribes the right remedy—both of which are unlikely in a brief visit to an experienced teacher's classroom.

One of the greatest barriers to improving teaching is its inherent complexity. Teachers make thousands of decisions about how to best teach dozens or hundreds of unique students, and administrators often find it difficult to guide them in making better decisions.

If Sam's feedback is off base in any way—if he has misunderstood the lesson or if he lacks the necessary expertise in mathematics instruction—Carol can avoid harming student learning only by ignoring it, possibly at risk to her own career. And if Sam gives bad feedback, he will learn nothing—or worse, he'll learn the wrong lessons from the interaction.

In contrast, when instructional leaders adopt a "go and see" approach to classroom conversations, they maximize their opportunities for professional growth, teacher development, and organizational learning.

A Game Plan

If you'd like to spend more time in classrooms, consider the following approach:

Visit three classrooms a day, every day, observing for 5–10 minutes in each classroom.

While students are working, or when the teacher is free, have a brief, open-ended conversation with the teacher.

Focus your inquiry on professional and organizational learning, not on feedback.

You don't need a complicated process or any special tools to do this. Simply "go and see," and talk with teachers. Over the course of the school year, you'll observe each teacher a dozen or more times, depending on the number of teachers you supervise.

You'll quickly find that these conversations build relationships, trust, and the knowledge you need to keep improving. And you may discover that classroom conversations are the best professional development you've ever experienced as an instructional leader.

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