



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Craig Randall

Trust-based observations fuel teacher growth

When I became a principal, one of my primary goals was to provide teachers the kind of feedback and support I craved but didn't experience as a teacher. I believe a principal's top priority has to be doing everything possible to optimize teaching and learning, just as a teacher's job is to do everything possible to maximize student learning.

The most powerful tool to improve teaching and learning is the observation process — that is, when it is done with a focus on growing the individual capacity of each teacher instead of making evaluative, graded judgements. Studies show that such summative judgments decrease teachers' creativity, innovation, and risk-taking (O'Leary, 2017).

If you ask teachers about their experiences with the observation process, you are likely to hear comments like these: "It's just a dog-and-pony show." "They only saw me one time, then told me to get better at something that is a strength for me. They just didn't see it that day." "They observed me but never gave me feedback."

When I observe teachers, I aim to change this pattern using a process I call trust-based observation — a focused, manageable, and nonevaluative process that emphasizes teacher reflection and growth. At the heart of this approach is building trusting relationships with teachers so they feel safe taking risks in their practice. I want them to know that if I come into class when they are

trying something new and it doesn't work, the next day they are going to get a high-five for being a risk-taker.

Frequent visits and reflective conversations focused on deep listening and teacher strengths help make this environment possible. But for the process to work well, school leaders must be thoughtful and well-prepared about all of its stages: planning, observation, and the reflective conversation.

PLANNING

The first step to an effective observation cycle is careful and intentional planning, bearing in mind the following:

- Frequent short visits are key to success. I recommend 20 minutes as just the right amount of time. Conduct observations for all teachers and cycle continuously, meaning that as soon as one observation-reflection cycle concludes, the next cycle begins.

- Maintaining the regularity of visits is important. Developing a specific routine helps to ensure you reach all teachers. I recommend three observations per day each Monday through Thursday and three reflective conversations each Tuesday through Friday. Getting in the habit is like working out. Some days are easy, and some days you have to force yourself.

- Unannounced visits help you see what really happens in classrooms, rather than potentially seeing a teacher's "performance." Because of the positive nature of the reflective conversations, teachers quickly become comfortable with unannounced visits.

- Plan to view each teacher's classes at the beginning, middle, and end of the period over the course of the year.

- Get organized and stay organized. Create a daily observation schedule, and plan visits for first thing in the day before things get hectic. Have a backup observation planned in case something comes up and the original teacher is unavailable. Use a Google doc or other spreadsheet to keep notes organized for each teacher.

- Record observations and reflective conversations using a structured document for consistency.

OBSERVATION

Teaching is art and craft. Keep your observation methods as consistent as possible, but remember that some of the things that help teachers to positively impact student learning or make a teacher special don't fit into a quantifiable box to check, like a teacher's passion.

Here are some other tips to keep in mind:

■ When you record your observations, use a tool that is research-based, aligned with your school's teaching and learning principles, and manageable in size. Researchers have found that when there are too many indicators, observers have too much trouble keeping the competencies and indicators distinct and become overloaded (TNTP, 2013). I recommend using no more than 10 indicators.

■ Concentrate on writing down evidence of the teaching strengths you notice. Focusing on these strengths helps you develop a strengths-based mindset and build trust during the reflective conversation.

■ Include a student interview as part of the observation. Asking students about what they are learning is a valuable check to ensure alignment between teaching and learning.

■ Write down teacher quotes as much as possible. Teachers are often unaware of what they say, and hearing their own words can be a powerful tool in growth or in building confidence. For example, I observed a teacher who was masterful at building student confidence and grit with the encouragement she gave to students. When I read the quotes to her, she was unaware she had made these types of comments. Because this was shared, her confidence bloomed and other teachers who struggled with giving encouragement now had the opportunity to observe and learn from her.

■ You don't have to feel obligated to observe or record every indicator every time. The cumulative nature of the observations tells us what is working well and what is a potential area for growth.

THE REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION

The reflective conversation is the most important element of the observation process. These conversations are where trust is built and growth happens. But with vulnerability inherent in the process of observation and reflection, how do we make



these conversations as effective as possible? Start by asking questions and being an active listener.

My first two questions are always:

1. What were you doing to help students learn?
2. If you had the opportunity to reteach the entire lesson, what, if anything, would you do differently?

These questions encourage reflection and give you an opportunity to get to know your teacher while building trust.

Next, focus on observed strengths. When teachers appreciate that administrators notice what they do well, the sense that an administrator is "out to get" the teachers disappears. I recommend focusing the first three reflective conversations exclusively on observed teacher strengths to help build that trust.

It's better to take the time to really get to know teacher strengths and areas for growth before offering suggestions. I have found that waiting to talk about areas for growth is worth it. In fact, teachers often end up

asking me for suggestions on how to improve even before I bring it up.

Additional tips to build trust and buy-in during the reflective conversation:

■ The more comfortable you can help the teacher feel, the more trusting and able to learn he or she is likely to be. For example, conducting the reflective conversation in the teacher's classroom can be less intimidating than in your office.

■ Only offer a suggestion as the last part of the reflective conversation. Offering it earlier can cause teachers to feel anxious or judged, and, as a result, they sometimes don't hear the compliments of strengths that you share.

■ Avoid the words "need" and "should." People get defensive with the use of these words.

Only work on one growth area at a time. When people spread their growth focus on more than one area, efforts are diluted and the growth is minimal. When the focus is on one area, the growth is more substantial.

When done well, the reflective conversation can lead not only to teacher growth, but also

whole-school improvement. When you spend a lot of time in classes, you learn about teachers' expertise and can then empower them by finding ways to have teachers lead professional learning sessions and PLC groups, or pair them up to build on each other's strengths.

In addition, I have found that the thoughts teachers share during reflective conversations often lead to new initiatives that propel the whole school forward. For example, when I praised a teacher for her skill in differentiating instruction for her students, she made helpful suggestions for enhancing differentiation schoolwide.

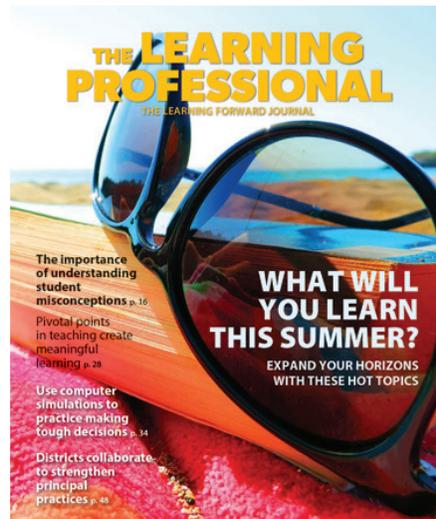
These ideas led directly to revamping English courses to provide multiple novel choices in each genre studied and to that teacher leading numerous schoolwide professional development sessions. Without the frequent and positive nature of classrooms visits and conversations, these ideas would not have manifested themselves.

Teachers work hard and are proud of the work they do to help students grow. As school leaders, we support and celebrate teachers' growth. Trust-based observations are the best way I know to understand and build teachers' capacity, and therefore to help all students succeed. ■

REFERENCES

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Craig Randall (craig@trustbased.com), president of Trust Based Enterprises, has used lessons learned from his experiences as a school counselor, college basketball coach, teacher, and principal to create trust-based observations.