

- *Being merciful* – “Somebody’s job is in your hands,” says Jennifer Nauman, a Delaware principal. “The rubric is very subjective.”

- *Keeping the troops happy* – Principals need to maintain positive relationships with their colleagues, and low ratings on performance evaluations can wreak havoc. “We have to take seriously the fact that teacher evaluation is a relational enterprise,” says Allison Gilmour, coauthor of the multi-state study.

- *The devil you know...* – If a teacher is dismissed or transfers to another school as a result of a negative rating, the replacement might be even less effective.

- *Cowardice* – Many principals find it hard to confront a teacher with negative information. “The most difficult part of the job is probably to deliver those difficult messages,” says a veteran principal, “and not everyone is capable of that.”

“Principals Are Loath to Give Teachers Bad Ratings” by Liana Loewus in *Education Week*, July 13, 2017, summarized in Marshall Memo 695.

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Giving and Receiving Feedback with Grace and Skill

“Feedback is fraught and complex because human relationships are fraught and complex,” say Douglas Stone (Triad Consulting, Harvard Law School) and Jenn David-Lang (*The Main Idea*) in this *Educational Leadership* article. Here are their ideas on making feedback less threatening and more productive:

- *Separate coaching from evaluation.* Teachers need evaluations to know where they stand, and principals are required to evaluate for compliance and decisions about tenure, promotions, and dismissals. But when an evaluation is shared in the same meeting as coaching, judgments hijack teachers’ attention: *What will my evaluation score be? Will it be fair? Does the principal know what I’ve been contributing? What if I don’t get the evaluation I deserve? What will I say to my spouse?* The coaching feedback goes in one ear and out the other.

The solution to this perennial problem is to separate formal evaluation meetings (conducted once or twice a year) from coaching (much more frequent). “Coaching sessions should include no rubric scoring or other evaluations,” say Stone and David-Lang.

- *Be thoughtful about receiving criticism.* “The person getting the feedback has the power to decide whether it’s on target, fair, or helpful,” say the authors, “and to decide whether to use the feedback or dismiss it.” This inconvenient truth challenges feedback-givers to tune in to the

recipient's responses and know that if the interaction isn't handled skillfully, it's going to waste both people's time.

When a principal is the recipient of critical feedback—for example, the superintendent e-mails, expressing concern about a decline in math scores—the immediate reaction may be to discount the feedback: “This superintendent has no idea of the extraordinary efforts we’ve been making on this front now that the Algebra 2 test has become Common Core-aligned. He was an English teacher with little background in math, and he should respect the efforts the math teachers have made.” This is an understandable reaction, say Stone and David-Lang, but it’s important to look at what might be right about the feedback, pull in an assessment expert, and compose a thoughtful response to the boss.

When feedback rubs us the wrong way, it’s also important to dig deeper to understand what’s really going on. For example, a principal expresses displeasure with the way an assistant principal is supervising grade-level teams. The AP needs to find out if the principal observed something that was amiss in a team meeting, if it’s an issue of supervisory style, or it’s another problem. Time for a quick face-to-face meeting to unpack the principal’s concern.

“For school leaders, becoming good at giving and receiving feedback comes with an added benefit,” say Stone and David-Lang: “There is no training you can offer, no teaching you can provide, that will improve the quality of feedback at your school as much as your own example Be noisy about the importance of improving your school’s feedback culture—for students, for teachers, for parents, and for yourself.”

“Stop Sabotaging Feedback” by Douglas Stone and Jenn David-Lang in *Educational Leadership*, May 2017 (Vol. 74, #8, pp. 47–50), summarized in Marshall Memo 686.
