

one-on-one walk, or sharing time at an event can help you connect as human beings and keep the common enterprise in mind. As former U.S. Army general Stanley McChrystal says, "It's not enough to be great; you have to be great together."

"You Just Had a Difficult Conversation at Work. Here's What to Do Next" by Dolores Bernardo in *Harvard Business Review*, May 29, 2017, summarized in Marshall Memo 693.

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Should Principals Give Critical Feedback While Observing a Class?

In this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Kim Marshall explores the appropriateness of supervisors jumping in with redirection or contributions during short, informal classroom visits (versus observing and talking later). Here's when administrators are tempted to intervene during a lesson:

- If the teacher is missing an opportunity to make an important point;
- If some students seem confused, and the teacher isn't noticing;
- If the teacher makes a consequential error (like mixing up perimeter and area);
- If a student's behavior is seriously disrupting instruction;
- To contribute an idea in a discussion.

An example: A history teacher finishes explaining a point and asks, "Is everyone with me?" A student says yes, and the teacher starts to move on, but the principal at the back of the room senses that many students don't understand and asks, "Do you mind if I ask your students a couple of questions?" The teacher nods, the principal interacts with students for a couple of minutes, and when the teacher proceeds, student mastery is much improved—and she does a better job teaching the remaining classes that day.

Proponents of "real-time coaching" believe it's one of the best ways to get feedback to stick in teachers' minds, especially with rookies struggling with pedagogy and classroom management. But there are concerns that real-time coaching will undermine teachers' authority with students; throw teachers off their stride; distract students from curriculum content as they observe possibly tense adult interactions; change the dynamic being observed, resulting in a less-accurate picture of the teacher's work; and encourage teachers to game the system by nimbly showcasing what observers are looking for (e.g., turn-and-talk, checking for understanding) but not changing their practices the rest of the time. One former administrator had this reaction: "Improving adult practice is complex and requires lots of trust, time, and care. I fear advocates of real-time coaching are looking for a silver bullet, an easy way."

Those who believe in during-class interventions disagree. *Seize the moment!* they say. Waiting for the post-observation conference risks losing the immediacy of the classroom context and won't have nearly the same impact. Besides, supervisor/teacher conferences are often bogged down in compliance checklists and rubrics, and people are so busy that they often don't get around to having them. One New York City educator said that critics of in-class interventions should be less concerned with teachers' feelings and more concerned with students whose education is being compromised by mediocre and ineffective practices.

Marshall hears the arguments in favor of real-time coaching and wonders what the research will ultimately find about its effectiveness. For the present, he recommends starting with some basic questions: What is the ultimate goal of teacher supervision and evaluation? *Getting effective teaching in more classrooms more of the time.* What is the best way to accomplish that? "Since even the most energetic supervisors observe teachers only about 0.1 percent of their teaching time," says Marshall, "we need to create intrinsic motivation in teachers to use effective practices the other 99.9 percent of the time." And how can school leaders get struggling teachers to internalize effective teaching practices, bring their A-game every day, and adopt a continuous-improvement mindset? By judicious hiring, teacher teamwork, instructional coaching, peer observations, PD, and formal evaluations.

"Why is teacher evaluation ranked last?" Marshall asks. "Because research tells us that, with rare exceptions, traditional evaluations have not played an important role in improving teaching and learning. Alas, administrators' time is often consumed by documentation, evaluation, and compliance—and the myriad other things they need to do to keep their schools running smoothly. Real-time coaching is a well-intentioned attempt to improve this dismal record." And because of the crushing time-management challenges school administrators face, it's very appealing to be able to take care of coaching during an observation.

However, is it possible that real-time coaching is a false efficiency, asks Marshall. Here are some reasons to doubt its usefulness as a supervisory tool:

- *Difficulty level* – "Scoping out what's going on in a classroom during a short visit is complex and demanding work," he says, "and coming up with wise and helpful feedback on the spot is a high bar." Supervisors enter with background knowledge about the teacher and the curriculum but need to watch and listen carefully, look over students' shoulders at the instructional task, check in with one or two students ("What are you working on today?"), see what's on the board or screen, and listen to the teacher. "Shooting from the hip during the class seriously risks getting it wrong and undermining the kind of trust that's essential for teachers to be receptive to the input," says Marshall.

- *Superficiality* – The tendency with during-class interventions is to focus on classroom management and teachers' tactical moves rather than deeper curriculum and pedagogical issues, he says: "During short classroom observations, visitors can only guess at what occurred before and after the visit and may not understand the broad curriculum goals or a teacher's on-the-fly adaptations." The best way to get that information is a few minutes of face-to-face conversation with the teacher, but that's not possible during a lesson.

- *Power trip* – Teachers might hear this implicit message: "Not only can I walk into your classroom any time, but I will interrupt your teaching when I feel like it." To many teachers, this may come across as disrespectful—and 99 percent about administrative convenience. One educator told Marshall that if a supervisor had acted this way early in his teaching career, it would have driven him out of the profession.

- *Stress* – If there's always the possibility of being interrupted, teachers may find supervisory visits much more fraught. "Administrators are never going to be invisible during classroom visits," says Marshall; "—students and teachers are well aware of their presence—but the dynamic is heightened if supervisors frequently jump in."

- *Competence* – "Finally," he says, "let's be frank, some principals, assistant principals, and department heads don't have a good eye for instruction, lack an understanding of the essentials of good pedagogy, are opinionated about one best way to teach, and lack the skillset needed to have helpful feedback conversations with teachers. In the hands of supervisors like these, real-time coaching can do serious damage to teaching and learning, not to mention faculty morale." Of course, it's the job of superintendents and their designees to deal with competence issues, and that's best done by co-observing lessons with their building administrators on a regular basis, improving ineffective practices, and removing those who can't or won't get better.

Proponents of real-time coaching push back. These problems can be solved, they say, if administrators are competent, teachers know the process up front, there are trusting relationships, and students see all adults in the school as learners. With all this in place, they contend, on-the-spot feedback is much more powerful than traditional teacher supervision and evaluation. And there are kinder and gentler ways for supervisors to intervene during a lesson—for example, whispering in the teacher's ear while students do group work; texting or slipping the teacher a note; gesturing toward a student who seems confused; or giving a misbehaving student "the look." In some schools and teacher-training programs, supervisors equip teachers with a Bluetooth earpiece and use a cell phone to talk quietly into their ear from the back of the room.

Marshall agrees that the time-honored, four-hour process (pre-observation conference, full-lesson observation, analysis and write-up, and post-conference) is largely a waste of time, but

argues that short classroom visits followed promptly by five- to ten-minute feedback chats can have significant impact. "Coaching suggestions are much more likely to be heard and acted on if the teacher has a chance to explain the context and the bigger picture in a face-to-face conversation," he says. "These conversations may include strong redirection (*I didn't hear a single higher-order thinking question while I was in there*), and supervisors can learn a great deal from how teachers react to criticisms and reflect on their work.

In short, high-quality debriefs are golden opportunities to get inside teachers' heads and strengthen instruction." Key factors, of course, are a manageable caseload of teachers and being liberated from the ineffective traditional evaluation process. Then supervisors can focus on two-to-three short observations and conversations a day, followed by brief narrative documentation.

"When it comes to affirming and improving teaching," Marshall concludes, "there are no shortcuts. With real-time coaching, the skill threshold is too demanding, the risks of being superficial or getting it wrong too high, the probability of upsetting and alienating teachers too great, and the chances of not having deeper conversations about teaching and learning too real. The good news is that supervisors can avoid these pitfalls by taking a little more time, reflecting a little more carefully, and engaging teachers in face-to-face coaching after each observation. Fitting in these conversations is challenging, and they are sometimes stressful on both sides, but this is the core work of school leaders. Doing it well will result in more effective teaching in more classrooms more of the time."

"Should Supervisors Intervene During Classroom Visits?" by Kim Marshall in *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2015 (Vol. 97, #2, pp. 8-13), summarized in Marshall Memo 606.
