



# INSPIRE LEARNING, NOT DREAD

CREATE A FEEDBACK CULTURE THAT LEADS TO IMPROVED PRACTICE

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**P**olicymakers have turned to teacher evaluation as one way to ensure accountability for school reform. In most evaluation systems, the emphasis focuses on the external: test scores, observations of classroom practices, rubric-based assessments, student feedback, evaluation, and student work.

While these activities have a place in professional development, they distract from the most important variable of all: the teacher’s mindset about continued growth and learning. How professionals receive and apply feedback is the cornerstone in any system for improving teacher performance. Feedback is most often given during teacher evaluations, after classroom observations, after walk-throughs, during peer reviews, and sometimes within the context of coaching. However, this leaves out the teacher’s cognitive capital. Cognitive capital defines the inner resources of a

**REFLECTION TOOL: CALIBRATING FEEDBACK**

The best way to know when feedback has been accepted and will likely shape practice is to ask for feedback about the feedback. By doing so, the giver of feedback capitalizes on teacher thinking and seeks agreement on next steps. This guide is based on Stone and Heen’s (2014) work on triggers that distort feedback. These questions represent a small portion of what could be asked, so use them to get started and then decide on your own questions.

TRIGGERS	FEEDBACK PROVIDER’S QUESTIONS	RECEIVER’S REFLECTIONS
<b>TRUTH TRIGGERS</b> Are we honest with each other?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In what parts of our conversation did you feel most understood?</li> <li>What data might we collect to help us with your next steps?</li> <li>Did you find yourself holding back on any of your answers?</li> <li>Did you disagree with anything I said or feel that my feedback did not match your perceptions?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did I speak up from a place of truth about how I perceived the feedback?</li> <li>If I held back information or was disingenuous, what do I perceive is triggering the response?</li> <li>What might happen that would make me more willing to say the truth?</li> <li>What data could we collect to show a truer viewpoint?</li> </ul>
<b>RELATIONSHIP TRIGGERS</b> Do we value the time spent in relationship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How has this conversation been different from other conversations we have at work?</li> <li>How has this conversation helped us come to know each other better?</li> <li>What parts of this conversation did you most value?</li> <li>Did you feel that I had your best interest in mind during the conversation?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did I in any way feel devalued by the person giving me the feedback?</li> <li>Was my viewpoint solicited and listened to?</li> <li>Did I feel talked down to?</li> <li>How would I like this conversation to be different in the future?</li> </ul>
<b>IDENTITY TRIGGERS</b> Did this conversation engender positive beliefs about my own capabilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How reflective was our conversation?</li> <li>Did we probe deeply or just stay on the surface?</li> <li>Did you at any time feel that you just wanted to get this over, and, if so, at what point in the conversation?</li> <li>At what moments in the conversation did you feel your thinking most valued?</li> <li>In what ways does this conversation increase your faith in your own capabilities?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did this conversation feel safe enough that I was willing to reflect on my deeper self?</li> <li>Did I come to better understand or shift my ideas about the topic?</li> <li>In what ways did this conversation support my identity of being a learner?</li> <li>What does feedback reveal about how I see myself?</li> <li>Is this an organizational culture I trust?</li> </ul>

teacher, which frames thought and shapes reflection before, during, and after practice — key measures of quality instruction (Costa, Garmston, & Zimmerman, 2014). When leaders foster a school culture that supports emotional resourcefulness and transparency, cognitive capital increases and individuals are more able to receive, interpret, and apply feedback to improve professional practice.

This idea of incremental improvement through feedback — one teacher at a time, one classroom at a time — needs rethinking. Instead, reform efforts might be better served by promoting a culture that has learned how to receive and apply feedback in order to build collective wisdom.

How each person responds to feedback reveals much about the degree of trust and the value placed on continuous improvement and learning within a school culture. Lipton and Wellman (2012) emphasize that feedback is just the beginning of a conversation that explores and improves practice. When leaders are skillful, the culture begins to value and engage in data-driven, inquiry-based conversations between colleagues about improving practice.

In our work in schools, we have found that school cultures that practice the art of applying feedback tend to build robust and thoughtful models of instruction. These types of cultures focus on mastery, not just performance, and promote a growth mindset, which encourages innovation, creativity, experimentation, and learning from failure.

In contrast, feedback that focuses only on external performance reinforces a fixed mindset. In this context, feedback that shapes school culture comes from a place of judgment: “Do it the right way” or “don’t make mistakes.” More deeply embedded is the message: “Someone else knows better.” This approach can often activate for sensitive individuals an anxiety about not being good enough and, most damaging of all, reduces

teacher efficacy.

Before systems can build a culture that embraces feedback from a growth mindset, leaders first have to understand the barriers that inhibit the receipt of suggested improvements from an external observer. Next, leaders need to identify the types of relationships that foster positive interpretations of comments so feedback is accepted as a way of improving professional practice.

A thoughtful evaluator will think about how to advise, what to focus on, and what to ignore. He or she will wonder how to provide data to a teacher whose lesson aligns perfectly with the standards, yet lacks positive engagement with students. That same observer might also ask: How will this person receive the feedback? Will they listen and use my suggestions constructively? More importantly, a thoughtful leader will ask: How will I know if the feedback was received, accepted, and applied

to improve practices?

To ensure that this happens, an evaluator must find opportunities to engage with the teacher’s beliefs and values and expand the conversation to focus on the teacher’s thinking and perceptions.

To foster positive relationships that increase the possibility that the feedback will be accepted and acted upon, evaluators need to understand the obstacles to receiving feedback and learn ways to overcome them.

Obstacles to receiving feedback include: basing the feedback on a thin slice of performance; an imbalance of power between teacher and evaluator; and the teacher’s mindset about receiving feedback.

### THIN SLICE OF PERFORMANCE

One obstacle to receiving feedback is that it is based on a thin slice of performance, which might be perceived as devaluing the complexity of teaching and learning (Myung & Martinez, 2013).

The teacher will always hold a larger and richer context than the observing principal. When feedback is delivered from an occasional, momentary observation, it is often not received as a true representation of that teacher’s abilities or talents. When this “thin slice” is not perceived as significant to the teacher, the feedback will be dismissed.

To overcome this perception, the evaluator can engage in conversations with the teacher that build in choice — in this case, before the observation. This approach establishes a norm that allows the teacher to choose the lesson and the desired feedback.

Setting a value on teacher choice communicates that feedback needs to be about important teaching moments, not just random visits framed by an observer. Allowing choice signals to the teacher: “I want to learn about your teaching. What you think is important. What are the types of feedback that will most support you in a growth mindset?” In our experience with coaching, this kind of collaborative learning framework encourages positive relationships and acknowledges a growth mindset, which increases one’s cognitive capital.

Stone and Heen (2014) remind us that the descriptions of feedback are labels, subject to interpretation through each person’s perceptions. Even when the feedback meets the norm of being specific, measurable, and constructive, the receiver must be given quality time to interpret, make meaning from, and adapt the feedback. Reflecting aloud about the feedback, then projecting possible applications, builds commitment and increases the odds that the teacher will use the feedback to improve instruction.

To further shape a school culture that addresses external demands such as Common Core State Standards and teacher evaluations, the leader must work with the school community to clearly define shared goals for observation and feedback that

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focus on mastery and a deeper understanding of the craft of teaching, not one-time performances.

By allowing opportunities for teachers to insert personal learning goals and reflections, these types of conversations shift from episodic to planned, purposeful, and ongoing, creating a job-embedded, collaborative model.

### IMBALANCE OF POWER

Another obstacle in giving feedback is the imbalance of power in a superior/subordinate relationship, which can cause the teacher to feel a sense of disempowerment and a threat to his or her professional image.

In most schools, the principal controls how the evaluation process unfolds as well as the end result. When professionals feel powerless, it is not uncommon to experience increased anxiety, vulnerability, and fear, creating an emotional, not a cognitive, reaction. Negative emotional reactions trigger noncognitive responses that show up as defensiveness, helplessness, or stonewalling, which signal that the feedback will be discounted.

Savvy leaders pay attention to how feedback is received, noting defensive behaviors, and adjusting the conversation to elicit more of the teacher's viewpoint, open up options, and create a more equal playing field.

To balance the power administrators have in observations and evaluation, it is helpful to develop a protocol that informs teachers and administrators how the feedback conversation will unfold. Leaders should strive for agreement within the school on the purpose of feedback.

When using mastery, not performance, as a guide, the end result is on learning, building cognitive capital, and reciprocity. The whole community, including the principal, commits to building collective intelligence that values feedback as an important aspect of human growth and learning.

By adopting protocols or procedures, the community names the shared agreements. When all parties commit to the collaborative conversation, ownership for receiving feedback, making meaning of it, and applying it to instruction increases.

The trick to making feedback useful is to understand that it is not the observer's story, but rather the narrative that the teachers create from the feedback to plan for future actionable results. In our experience, these narratives must surface challenges, identify insights, and provide plans to apply the new learning in a future lesson.

This is best done in collaborative, trusting environments in which everyone becomes an equal learning partner. According to Stone and Heen (2014), "How we receive feedback is actually more important than how we give feedback. If your goal is to empty the sink by sending the water down the drain, which is more important: How you run the faucet or whether the drain is open? You can be the most skillful feedback giver on the planet, but at the end of the day, the receiver is in charge of what they let in, and how and whether they choose to change."

### MINDSETS ABOUT RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Stone and Heen (2014) also remind us that feedback is a lifetime habit developed in part by our nature (how sensitive we are) and by the models we observe. Each person learns to calibrate feedback as positive, negative, or neutral — and interpretations can vary widely.

Because feedback is a reflection on one's performance and professional image, it is not surprising how easily it can be rejected, especially if it is not coherent with an individual's perception of his or her identity.

What complicates feedback even more is the perception of trust. When teachers do not sense trust in the relationship, feedback will have little if any opportunity for changing professional behaviors. Cultures that lack trust are more likely to perceive feedback as negative and to react with protective responses adopting a psychological posture that is argumentative or passive-aggressive.

Wise leaders work to promote a culture that is both trusting and trustworthy by regularly seeking feedback about the level of trust in the organization. This process of seeking feedback about the level of trust models directly how feedback can be requested and applied to improve learning.

When the receiver of feedback perceives suggestions or advice as constructive, the individual takes an active role in seeking out observations that reveal potential blind spots, exposing hidden talents, and identifying areas to grow and learn. The goal of feedback is to promote a growth mindset that leads to mastery, increases cognitive capital, and enhances one's professional capacity.

Carol Dweck's (2006) research suggests a way to reframe one's mindset about feedback. Her investigation with students found that when feedback focused on specific efforts, rather than superficial attributes, students persisted and were more willing to take on challenging tasks.

Bandura (1997) would view this type of feedback as building teacher efficacy — the sense that "I can make a difference." When teachers come to a collective understanding that they make a difference in students' lives, they thrive in a culture of collective efficacy (Hoy, Sweetland, & Smith, 2002).

Finally, a growth mindset requires a view of learning that Kegan (1994) calls self-authorship. This is an individual's ability to reflect on her own beliefs and organize her thoughts and feelings so that she can describe how she made up her mind to act. When each person can articulate his or her own learning story, the culture begins to reshape itself into a networked in-

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way of teaching as the single best approach for all subjects, grades, and student populations.

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formation system that seeks feedback as a fundamental way of doing business. This requires that professionals understand that coming to know is a shared journey, not a fixed destination.

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- helpful. We are able to analyze data that are specific to my class.”
- “The experience was not negative, but it provided corrective measures that I needed. You need a flexible, open mind to advance learning and teaching skills.”
  - From a first-year teacher: “I came into teaching with these ideas about how I would be very lecture-based and students would keep these big notebooks. But I have learned a lot. I have kept the lecture format, but I have implemented strategies that make them more responsible for their own learning. And students have taken more of an interest in the class because they get the hands-on experience and they are learning for themselves instead of just having someone tell

them what to do.”

These examples show that a teacher evaluation system with improving teacher effectiveness as its purpose and professional learning as its core can be successful at nurturing professional growth and fostering increased student learning.

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