

Lots of Talk—Little Dialogue



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Professional talk lies at the heart of improving teaching. The dialogue dimension is about creating opportunities for teachers to talk with their colleagues and leaders about learning and teaching. Both classrooms and staffrooms are places where there is a lot of talk. Indeed, there is no shortage of talk in schools; yet, there is sometimes not enough professional talk about teaching. In outstanding schools, there is more discussion about teaching and pedagogic skills than in other schools and it is organized, systematic, and led.

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Few would argue in this age of reform that there is tremendous value in having staff engage in deep, meaningful dialogue. Professional learning communities are characterised by such, and we have known this for years. Garmston and Wellman (1998) emphasised two decades ago, “When school faculties develop the skills of dialogue and discussion, they learn how to transform their talk into meaningful communication that improves relationships and makes a real difference for student learning.” Unfortunately, far too many leaders are still using techniques to engage staff in conversations that are ineffective.

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The system that is typically utilised by many leaders to initiate staff dialogue is evaluation. As much as I applaud the work of Charlotte Danielson and Robert Marzano to create appraisal systems that are rubric based, the reality is this system, despite the enhancements, fundamentally exists for a single purpose—to judge. Appraisal systems are not the means by which we grow staff; their intent is to determine whether or not we value an employee. Please don’t get me wrong—there is certainly a place for evaluation. However, it is not the system upon which we should rely to grow staff members professionally.

Appraisal is a system from its inception that was not designed to promote discourse. Leaders have tinkered with this system in hopes of making it do something it was not conceived to do. Teachers do not see appraisal as a means by which to grow professionally; rather, they perceive evaluation rubrics as the tools by which their merit is measured. As a result, many leaders are not engaging staff in true discourse. If we value dialogue, it is critical we explore other systems to provide opportunities for professional exchanges. We simply cannot continue to use managerial methods to do the work of instructional leadership.

Scott London defines dialogue as a process that involves “listening with empathy, searching for common ground, exploring new ideas and perspectives, and bringing unexamined assumptions into the open.” Furthermore, he identifies a number of advantages to dialogue including, but not limited to, those highlighted below.

- Overcoming mistrust
- Shaping vision
- Creating a shared sense of purpose
- Aligning objectives and strategies
- Gaining new perspectives and insights
- Strengthening bonds of community



Appraisal conversations do not generate these types of benefits. Rather, evaluation conferences—typically characterised by monologues, not dialogue—serve to clarify expectations, define responsibilities, identify shortcomings, and communicate worth. If we desire the benefits of dialogue that London has identified, other systems must be embraced that will produce discourse characteristic of professional learning communities. Leaders of a true PLC...

- Ensure staff members actively listen to one another.
- Create reasonable opportunities for peers to influence each other.
- Make certain all ideas are treated with dignity.
- Explore ways for staff to seek common ground on issues.
- Prove to others that all opinions have value.

So how do we accomplish these objectives? It begins with how we engage staff members in dialogue during faculty meetings. In traditional meetings much of the “discussion” that takes place occurs in one of the following manners: (1) the facilitator of the meeting delivers a monologue while participants sit passively; and/or (2) a few members of the staff monopolise the conversations. Both of these behaviours squelch the exchange of ideas among faculty.

Instructional leaders, on the other hand, intentionally structure interaction during meetings to ensure all individuals contribute to the discussion. Consider the Kagan Structures noted below as examples of how to make this a reality.

- **Timed RoundRobin** ensures all staff members are given the same amount of time to share personal views on the topic being addressed.
- **Talking Chips** makes use of communication regulators which allow all participants to share their observations as well as build on the ideas of others.
- **Pros-N-Cons** provides opportunities for all team members to overtly demonstrate they have seriously considered opposing viewpoints.



In the same amount of time that a few individuals can share, all staff members can contribute their thoughts. By structuring interaction in meetings, leaders treat everyone on the team in an equitable fashion, thereby moving the faculty toward becoming a professional learning community.

Understand that faculty meetings are not the only avenue of communications that must be addressed. Feedback systems must also be adopted that are nonjudgmental in nature (e.g., non-evaluative coaching, walk-throughs with reflective conversations). The bottom line is this: as leaders, we have to choose the systems that we embed in our organisations. Managers utilise ineffectual methods to involve staff in discussions. Instructional leaders engage all their staff in rich, intentional, structured interaction.

There is lots of talk taking place in schools. Is your talk growing staff professionally?

Further Reading

Garmston, R., & Wellman, B. (1998, April). Teacher Talk That Makes a Difference. Retrieved November 2017 from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr98/vol55/num07/Teacher-Talk-That-Makes-a-Difference.aspx>.

London, S. (n.d.). The Power of Dialogue. Retrieved December 2017 from <http://www.scottlondon.com/articles/ondialogue.html>.

National College for Teaching and Leadership. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2017 from http://www.inspiringleaderstoday.com/ILMaterials/LEVEL3_LIT-v4.0-2014_08_08-11_54_0/leading-and-improving-teaching/lit-s4/lit-s4-t04.html.

Related Resource



Cooperative Meetings

Charting the Voyage Toward a Community of Leaders and Learners

Meetings are one of the few times that the faculty is together. When structured well, they become the royal road to creating a community of leaders and learners. This groundbreaking resource offers both a vision and map: It charts the course to building positive staff relationships, ongoing professional development among faculty, and empowers your faculty to make wise decisions.

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