

Six Types of Supervisory Conferences

Madeline Hunter

Every conference between teacher and supervisor should have a primary purpose. If the purpose is instructional improvement, there are five ways to go about it.

With a feeling of dread, many teachers, principals, and supervisors face that encounter labeled "the supervisory conference." Often, to eliminate the discomfort, it is turned into a brief, mutually laudatory, social interaction. "You're a fine teacher; I've marked you outstanding in every category. Sign right here and tell me about your summer vacation plans." "Thank you, you're a mighty nice principal too; we're thinking of a motor trip to Canada." You will doubtless recall similar situations in which you may have participated as either teacher or supervisor.

Why is this potentially productive situation so often sterile? Why aren't more educational benefits

reaped from that precious and costly conference time, often occurring before or after school when other tasks need doing? The answer is the same as the answer to the question, "Why didn't we land on the moon earlier?" We didn't know how!

This is not to deny that many administrators and supervisors have intuitively been doing a reasonably effective job of conferencing with teachers. Intuition, however, is a poor substitute for professional competence. We now have the knowledge, and the common vocabulary needed to transmit that knowledge, to develop competence in holding conferences.¹ Four important generalizations can be made about the different purposes and outcomes of supervisory conferences:

1. *Supervisory conferences have two discrete functions.* The most important conference function is promotion of the teacher's growth in effective instruction: the business of the school. Conferences designed to improve instruction must be both diagnostic and prescriptive and are more accurately labeled *instructional conferences*. If they are successful, the teacher will subsequently demonstrate increased instructional effectiveness and the quality of education in the school will be enhanced.

A secondary function of a supervisory conference is evaluation. The objective of an *evaluative conference* is that a teacher's placement on a continuum from "unsatisfactory" to "outstanding" will be established and the teacher will have the opportunity to examine the evidence used. An evaluative conference should be the summation of many instructional conferences. Assessment of teaching should not be based solely on a teacher's current performance, but should reflect the teacher's potential for growth. Evidence for that may be found in his or her response to, and the improvement resulting from, previous instructional conferences.

2. *A supervisory conference should have a primary purpose.* Most of the conference time and communication should be directed to a primary objective. This is not to say that there may not be other related



Photo: Joe Di Dio, NEA.

¹ Gerda Lawrence and Madeline Hunter, *Parent-Teacher Conferencing*, El Segundo, California: TIP Publications, (1978).

"No instructional conference will be successful unless the observer utilizes and models those cause-effect teaching and learning relationships that promote both teachers' and students' achievements."

objectives, but none antithetical to the primary purpose should be included. (Making a weak teacher feel that with increased effort success is possible and convincing him/her to choose a different occupation could both be valid objectives but not in the same conference. Convincing an inexperienced teacher that he/she is improving and identifying a major teaching deficit are antithetical objectives.)

3. *The principles of learning that apply to students also apply to teachers.* If in the conference the administrator or supervisor uses principles of learning appropriately, a teacher's learning will be increased. If those principles are abused or ignored, teacher growth is hindered. Unless the supervisor or principal is skilled, he/she is apt to violate the very principles the teacher is being asked to learn. For example, a principal and I observed one teacher work with a group of students in an extremely negative manner, criticizing, pointing out errors, never commending correct responses or productive behavior. In the subsequent principal-teacher conference, the principal opened with, "Do you realize that you never said one positive thing in that whole lesson? All you did was emphasize what was wrong. . . ." The conference continued in the same vein with the principal completely unaware that she was modeling the very behavior she was attempting to change in the teacher.

4. *Teaching is behavior and can best be improved through analysis of that behavior.* In order to secure the information essential to a successful instructional conference, the supervisor must have observed an episode of teaching. The observation time can vary from a few minutes to a half hour. The writer's experience is that a 10- to 20-minute observation yields at least an hour of conference material. The observer must possess the skills of recording and analyzing what occurs. The teaching behaviors observed must then be interpreted and categorized as (a) those that promoted learning; (b) those that used precious time and energy yet contributed nothing to learning; and (c) those that, unintentionally, actually interfered with learning. Interpretations must be supported by the findings of research and the records of the observation. The ability to analyze an episode of teaching is a supervisory skill that can be mastered by those determined to learn it. Professional analysis of instruction is a

far cry from the useless global platitudes of "loves children," "dedicated," "committed," "nice voice and manner," which in the past have glossed over instructional strengths and deficits.

Instructional Conferences

When the supervisor has analyzed an observed episode of instruction, he or she needs to make a diagnostic judgment as to which of five possible objectives should be the primary purpose of the conference.

1. *Type A Instructional Conference—Purpose:* To identify, label, and explain the teacher's effective instructional behaviors giving research-based reasons for their effectiveness so the teacher knows what he/she has done and why it worked, and in the future can do it on purpose. *Objective:* At the end of the conference (not in some nebulous future) the teacher will identify teaching decisions and behaviors that promoted learning and state why they were effective.

To achieve this objective, the observer focuses only on those aspects of instruction that were effective and brings those decisions and behaviors to the conscious awareness of the teacher who then has an opportunity to learn reasons for their effectiveness.

• *Example—Observer:* "Your moving over and standing by John's desk when he wasn't listening was an excellent technique. Everyone is more obedient when the authority figure is close. That's what happens to all of us when we see the police car in the rearview mirror. Then, your using John's name in an example about his being a good ball player not only built his self-concept and caused him to listen, but paired his interest in athletics with your lesson on sentence patterns so his positive feelings about athletics could 'rub off' on grammar. You used three excellent instructional techniques: physical closeness, use of the student's name in a meaningful example, and pairing the student's interest with academic content."

For a first conference or with apprehensive or defensive teachers, Type A objectives may be the sole outcome of a productive instructional conference. Effective behaviors are brought to a conscious level and, as a result of knowing why they were effective, the teacher can use them deliberately and

appropriately in the future. Also, because the conference message is positive, a teacher will more proactively engage in subsequent conferences.

2. Type B Instructional Conference—*Purpose*: To stimulate the development of a repertoire of effective teaching responses so the teacher is not limited to those most frequently used. *Objective*: Teacher and observer will generate alternatives to behaviors which were effective in the observed lesson in case they should be less effective in a different situation.

All of us tend to become habitual in our responses, and as a result we may close off the development of new responses from which we can deliberately select the one that holds the greatest promise in a specific situation. Teachers can become set in their patterns of presentation, discipline, homework, or practice, thereby reducing flexibility in their teaching. Type B conferences are designed to break this encapsulation and create new options.

• *Example*—Observer: “Standing by Bill’s desk and using his name in a complimentary example was very effective. With most students that will work. What might you do if it didn’t?”

In a Type B conference, teachers are encouraged to generate alternatives that fit their particular style. The observer also is obligated to suggest additional strategies so teachers have the opportunity to develop alternatives they may not have known about or considered.

Note that Type A and B conferences focus only on effective teaching; something singularly neglected in most conferences. Professional growth results from the teacher knowing what made an action effective and from considering other potentially effective techniques.

3. Type C Instructional Conference—*Purpose*: To encourage teachers to identify those parts of a teaching episode with which they were not satisfied so that, in collaboration with the observer, strategies for reducing or eliminating future unsatisfactory outcomes will be developed. *Objective*: The teacher will identify solutions with potential for changing unsatisfying aspects of the lesson.

• *Example*—Teacher: “I assumed the students would have remembered the material. I was disappointed to see how much of it they had forgotten.” Observer: “It’s not unusual that we assume students remember and they don’t. What might be done to eliminate that situation?”

While the teacher is given the first opportunity to suggest solutions, it is also the obligation of the observer to pose possible solutions—or to acknowledge that he/she can’t think of any. Instructional conferencing is not a spectator sport.

• *Example*—Observer: “Sometimes a quick

check to see if students remember the process needed will not only help them recall it, but will alert you if they don’t. You might do one example together on the chalkboard. That can serve as a warm-up and a reminder before you move on to new material. If they’ve forgotten, you can reteach right then when it’s needed.”

Note that in Type A, B, and C conferences not one single negative or critical note has been introduced by the observer, yet each conference has tremendous potential for teacher growth in instructional effectiveness.

4. Type D Instructional Conference—*Purpose*: To identify and label those less effective aspects of teaching that were not evident to the teacher and to develop alternative procedures that have potential for effectiveness. *Objective*: The teacher will select alternative behaviors he/she might substitute for behaviors perceived by the observer (and hopefully by the teacher) as not so effective.

Identification of “what went wrong” is the most commonly perceived objective of an instructional conference, yet among the five possibilities for conferences that promote teacher growth it is the only one that has potential for injecting a negative note in supervisory communication.

Type D conferences, however, need not be negative. It is a positive experience to have perplexing instructional situations become understandable through interpretation by an observer. I once had the experience of having what seemed an incomprehensible lack of teaching success explained by an observer as the result of an inadvertent teaching miscue at a critical point in the lesson. Finding out what caused the trouble was the only information necessary to eliminate it. In a Type D conference the observer has the major, and sometimes sole, responsibility for identifying cause-effect relationships between teaching and student responses, and for generating alternative teaching decisions and behaviors that might be more productive.

In conducting a Type D conference, it is critical that the observer discipline him/herself to generate ways the teacher, with that teacher’s particular skills and style, might teach the lesson—not how the observer would have taught it. Type D conferences can be conducted only by an observer who knows learning principles, knows how to analyze the process of teaching, and knows how to bridge the gap between theory and practice. I emphasize again that these skills can be learned by most educators who are willing to put forth the time and the effort. Rarely should a teacher experience only a D conference. However, when Type A, B, and C conferences produce little or no instructional improvement, a Type D conference must be used to communicate data that confirm teach-



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ing performance as unsatisfactory—the kind of data that will, if necessary, hold up in court.

5. Type E Instructional Conference—*Purpose:* To promote continuing growth of excellent teachers. *Objective:* The teacher will select next steps in expanding his/her own professional growth.

We have learned to challenge gifted students to encourage continuing growth, but often our gifted teachers are left to provide their own stimulation or to become bored and atrophied. Countless principals have remarked, "I don't have to worry about _____, he/she is an excellent teacher." By not contributing to such a teacher's continuing growth, supervision is neglecting education's most powerful resource. A Type E (for excellent) conference is designed to promote growth beyond that which the teacher alone can generate.

- *Examples—Observer:* "That was a superb lesson. Would you be willing to put a similar lesson on videotape so we can use it to help new teachers?"

"Your ability to draw out shy students is remarkable. Will you go over your lesson with me to help me understand the cues that tell you when to push students and when to back off?"

"You have the skills to pilot this new program so we can identify strengths and weaknesses before we consider its adoption for the whole school."

"Your skills are such that others should be learning from you. Would you be willing to take a student teacher? You will grow from explaining why you do what you do, and the student teacher will have the advantage of not only learning about effective teaching but seeing it modeled daily."

The reader may be raising the question, "Isn't teaching excellence enough? Why should we be asking for more?" The question is the same as, "Why don't we just let the gifted learner do an excellent job at grade level? Why do we stretch thinking and performance?" The answer to both questions is: Growth is invigorating and self-actualizing. We do students and teachers a disservice when we do not permit, encourage, and demand that growth.

Sometimes it is difficult to identify next steps for the outstanding teacher, but acknowledging that a teacher is ready for and needs a new challenge will

encourage both of you to think of productive possibilities.

For the gifted teacher who has just achieved a new competence and has earned a respite, a Type A conference, with the teacher assuming the responsibility for identifying effective teaching actions and labeling the cues which indicated they might be effective, has the potential of bringing internalized and automated professional behavior to a conscious level for sophisticated analysis.

Successful Instructional Conferences

The objectives of the five types of instructional conferences are not mutually exclusive; and observer and teacher are encouraged to mix and match. Four conferences are totally positive and the fifth (Type D) has the potential for being either positive or negative depending on the skills of the observer. No conference can be predictably successful unless the observer possesses the professional skills of analyzing instruction in terms of cause-effect relationships and generating solutions to instructional problems. Beyond analytic skill there exist communication skills, which are teaching skills that achieve the objective of an instructional conference. No instructional conference will be successful unless the observer utilizes and models those cause-effect teaching and learning relationships that promote both teachers' and students' achievements.

Evaluative Conferences

An evaluative conference should be the summation of what has occurred in and resulted from a series of instructional conferences. Information given and conclusions reached in an evaluative conference should come as no surprise to the teacher because the supporting evidence has been discussed in previous instructional conferences. As a result, the evaluative conference has high probability for being perceived as fair, just, and supportable by objective evidence rather than based on subjective opinion. This conference is the culmination of a year's diagnostic, prescriptive, collaborative work with a teacher and supervisor who shared responsibility for the teacher's continuous professional growth.

This growth will occur more rapidly and predictably if the teacher's effort and growth is rewarded, and any professional gaps or deficiencies are interpreted in perspective rather than being overemphasized because a teacher doesn't immediately become the perfect model of the ideal educator. When administrators and supervisors work with teachers as teachers are expected to work with students, supervision will become a more highly skilled and respected function in our profession. *E_T*

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