The Conference Category System helps supervisors analyze their conferences with teachers.

A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO IMPROVING CONFERENCE SKILLS

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Of all the skills that contribute to a supervisor's effectiveness, none are more crucial than those related to conducting conferences. Research indicates that the success of a conference depends on the social-emotional climate created by the supervisor. By its nature, a conference induces some level of anxiety in the teacher. If the supervisor remains indifferent to this condition, the positive results of the conference may be undermined. The supervisor's skillful interpersonal communication with teachers has a direct impact on immediate and long-range instructional improvement.

How can supervisors identify critical conference behaviors? Even more important, how can they determine the impact of those behaviors on teachers? The Conference Category System (CCS) is a systematic and practical approach for supervisors to use in identifying and analyzing their conference-related behaviors.

The approach is systematic in that it provides specific, relatively objective data in categories related to the goals of the conference. The approach is also practical in that it requires only a brief orientation, demands little time and effort, and provides data in a form that is immediately useful.

Procedure

The Conference Category System focuses on nine of the most important skill areas in which supervisors should be competent to increase the probability of a successful conference: (1) Climate building, (2) Target setting, (3) Questioning, (4) Commentary, (5) Praise, (6) Nonverbal communication, (7) Balance, (8) Sensitivity, and (9) Closure. The instrument consists of three sections: (1) a description of each of the skill areas, (2) a set of pre- and post-questions pertinent to conference-related skills, and (3) an analysis form to estimate levels of skill attainment.

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The CCS can be applied using either a shared-analysis or self-analysis approach ideally in conjunction with a video or audiotape recording. (The audiotape precludes using the nonverbal category.) An observer must be present during the conference with a recording device for the shared-analysis approach; a recording instrument alone is necessary for self-analysis.

A unique feature and a particular advantage of the CCS is its two-dimensional analysis. The form includes two columns, one headed “Occurrence” for recording the extent to which each component is evident, and another headed “Effectiveness” for estimating the supervisor’s skill in performance. These two kinds of data—descriptive and evaluative—contribute to comprehensive analysis.

The following steps are recommended for applying the CCS approach:

1. Become familiar with the conference skill areas.
2. Respond to the pre-conference analysis questions.
3. Conduct a conference. A tape recording is necessary for the self-analysis approach and preferable for the shared-analysis approach.
4. Analyze the conference by completing the analysis form using the taped playback (self-analysis) or complete the analysis form with the observer.
5. Respond to the post-conference analysis questions.
6. Repeat steps 2-6 on a subsequent similar conference if skills need further improvement.

Conference Categories

1. Climate—Human feelings, attitudes, perceptions, and predispositions always influence interaction. The supervisor, therefore, needs to use these factors productively. Teachers who are being observed, and whose teaching is subject to close scrutiny, possibly evaluation, can be expected to be apprehensive. The supervisor has the immediate concern, then, of allaying undue anxiety, and convincing the teacher that the supervisor is there to help and support, that they share a common purpose toward which they can cooperatively direct their efforts.

Climate building, therefore, is crucial. In those cases in which the supervisor and teacher have already established familiarity and a trust relationship, attention to the climate may be more in the nature of maintaining than of building, and may be more covert than apparent. When a sound relationship is not already implicit, the supervisor must work at developing a climate of productive communication.

Climate building, of course, is the application of good human relations principles to the conference setting. The supervisor needs to be perceived as a friendly, good-humored, unassuming yet competent person. He/she needs to be unselfconscious enough to attend fully to the purpose of the conference. Then such comments as “You’re doing some things in your classroom that I’d like to know more about,” “This is one of the friendliest schools I can imagine,” and “How did you manage to write a study guide about,” “This is one of the friendliest schools I can imagine,” and “How did you manage to write a study guide about,” become very natural sounding—and, in fact, are natural—within the supervisory approach.

2. Target Setting—A formal conference should be preplanned and prepared for, contingent on the available time and relative importance of the conference. If, for example, the conference immediately follows an observation of a teaching episode, there is no opportunity to organize material and prepare an agenda. In this case the notes made during the episode constitute ad hoc target items, and are preferable to relying solely on one’s glibness. At the outset of the conference the topics to be discussed should be mentioned. If, on the other hand, the purpose of the conference is to evaluate the teacher’s performance over a considerable period of time, preparation of a formal nature would be expected.

Both parties should have an opportunity to suggest items to be discussed. A few moments should be spent agreeing on these and ordering them on the agenda. A sense of direction will then be imposed, and this in turn should promote a sense of comfort, especially on the part of the teacher; there is less likelihood of “surprises.”

3. Questioning—Questioning is only one of several verbal modes that a supervisor may use in a conference. However, it is probably the most important means for pursuing the conference objectives. Questioning is also the predominant factor in determining the conference “style” and competence of the supervisor.

During the introductory phase, after some attention to climate-building, the supervisor typically asks questions designed to initiate a topic for discussion. Often these questions cause the teacher to reflect on those aspects of his/her teaching that relate to the data collected during the classroom observation. Questions in this phase generally are of the focusing, probing, eliciting, clarifying, and bridging varieties. Information, simple ideas, and expressions of feelings are requested, and the responses form the basis for subsequent explorations.

Examples include: “What are your perceptions about the students’ behavior toward the end of the period?”; “How would you describe the level of student thinking stimulated during your simulation game?”; “What does the data from Interaction Analysis indicate about your use of direct teacher influence?”

Toward the end of the conference, the supervisor should guide the teacher in higher level thinking in order to process information and ideas previously mentioned. Ideally, the teacher, through the supervisor’s questions, will be able to analyze situations, discover areas needing improvement, and suggest strategies to resolve concerns or problems. Divergent questions, generally of the extending and synthesizing variety, should be used. Examples include: “What do you think caused the stu-
dent to react that way?"; "What is an alternative way to present that concept?"; "What should be included in a plan to implement these suggestions for improvement?"

4. Commentary—According to Carl Rogers, the greatest barrier to communication is the tendency of people prematurely to judge, to evaluate, and to approve or disapprove. The astute and sensitive supervisor will make comments that mirror the teacher's behavior, essentially distilling and clarifying that behavior so the teacher can focus on and examine it.

While criticism is sometimes necessary and evaluation may be one purpose for the conference, these modes are often overused, with detrimental effects. Relying principally on description, while skillfully guiding the teacher with questions and inferences to reflect on his/her teaching performance, is a productive supervisory technique.

Teachers benefit most from being guided to think critically about their own performance and encouraged to engage in problem solving as a part of their approach to teaching. Therefore, the supervisor should describe rather than evaluate, as much as possible.

5. Praise—Praise and encouragement are powerful means of positive reinforcement. If the supervisor intends to create the most productive climate in the conference, praise is an indispensable strategy.

The supervisor who is sensitive to the teacher's feelings will realize the value of deserved praise. However, praise and encouragement must be perceived as authentic by the teacher, as growing naturally out of the interaction within the conference. Gushing and "stroking" should be avoided. Otherwise, the supervisor's behavior will be suspect and the teacher may feel manipulated. This will undermine the supervisor's credibility and diminish his/her effectiveness as an agent for contributing to that teacher's improvement.

Praise is most effective if it is specific. Rather than saying, "You are doing a good job," make a statement such as, "Your inquiry style questioning was very effective. If I had a videotape of it, I'd use it to demonstrate questioning."

6. Nonverbal Communication—
Tacit messages are communicated through body language, which may either complement or contradict its verbal counterpart. The most effective conference occurs when verbal and nonverbal communication reinforce each other.

For the most part, nonverbal communication authentically reflects a supervisor's real attitudes, and a discerning teacher will be certain to recognize this. If, for example, the supervisor glances at the clock frequently during the conference, the teacher may assume the supervisor considers the conference to be perfunctory. Supervisors must monitor nonverbal actions closely and use them as a dynamic communicating instrument.

Charles Galloway has identified six messages that may be communicated nonverbally. Three of these are positive: enthusiastic support, helping, and receptivity. The other three are negative: inattention, unresponsiveness, and disapproval. When a supervisor feels enthusiastic, helpful, or receptive, he/she is likely to display nonverbal behaviors consistent with those feelings and positively reinforce verbal communication. When the supervisor is aware of negative feelings, a mental red flag should go up. Negative nonverbal communication should be employed only to achieve a desired effect, and then only with full awareness of the dynamics of the situation. The supervisor can't afford the luxury of uninhibited expression of deleterious emotions.

To promote good communication, facial expressions should be pleasant and animated. Eye contact is important to show attention and responsiveness and should be deliberately maintained. Gesturing, with the hands especially, but with the rest of the body, too, contributes to a dynamic presence. Reaching out and touching, used with discretion, can powerfully communicate empathy and understanding. Whatever the supervisor's nonverbal behavior, it should be carried out with full awareness and with deliberate purpose.

7. Balance—A productive conference requires two-way communication and the supervisor is responsible for balance in that communication. The supervisor must be a good listener while the teacher is talking, and must elicit teacher talk by expressing interest and encouragement when necessary.

For optimum transfer of conference outcomes to classroom practices, the supervisor should generally do less talking than the teacher, since insight occurs most readily when the teacher identifies his/her own behaviors, analyzes data, and conceives means for improvement. The supervisor should facilitate the transition of a teacher's thoughts from recall to problem solving. If the supervisor dominates the verbal activity of the conference, the opportunity for the teacher's expression, especially higher level expression, is diminished.

8. Sensitivity—The best conferences occur when the supervisor has sufficient confidence and maturity to be totally unselfconscious. If the supervisor's hidden agenda is a need for acceptance and support, then he/she will manipulate the conference to achieve personal ends. This happens at the expense of the teacher's needs and feelings.

The supervisor should approach the conference with certain predispositions: the intent to establish a warm climate, to use nonverbal cues, to provide praise and support, and to attempt to transcend the teacher's spoken ideas to a level of feeling and meaning that lies beyond. The supervisor working at this level can ask questions that lead the teacher to personal insights, answer implicit questions the teacher isn't able to ask, and deal with feelings the teacher is reluctant to express.

The area of sensitivity separates the merely competent supervisor from the supervisor who is inspiring. The supervisor whose style is sensitive and compassionate is the one most likely to cause significant and worthwhile change in teachers.

9. Closure—The conference is a teaching-learning setting. Just as any well-planned and competently executed teaching episode ends with an appropriate closure, so does the conference.

Closure reinforces the important conference outcomes. Closure also clarifies the extent to which the purposes of the conference have been achieved and leaves the teacher and supervisor with a sense of accomplishment. Finally, and most important, the conference should culminate in a commitment to some resolution or course of action, possibly by the supervisor as well as the teacher, that is intended to improve teacher performance.

In form, closure usually involves summarizing the target topics, with a restatement of and mutual agreement on outcomes. The supervisor may pose questions designed to elicit statements of commitment from the teacher. For example, "How will you cope with this situation the next time you encounter it?"; "What improvements do you hope to make by the end of the term?"; and "What is your order of priorities?"

Conference Analysis Questions

Before conducting the conference:

1. What do I expect to be the optimal outcome of the conference?
2. What verbal and nonverbal behaviors will I use to build a supportive climate?
3. What questions will I ask in order to have the teacher identify problem areas?
4. Which of the other conference skill areas will I particularly attend to during the conference?

After the conference:

1. To what extent did I achieve my conference goals?
2. How did the teacher respond to the climate I created?
3. How can I improve in formulating and asking questions?
4. Which conference skill areas should I focus on during my next conference?

The Conference Category System is most useful as an awareness-raising device and as a source of information for self-analysis or dialogue in shared-analysis. It lends itself to supervisor development by way of indicating directions for possible improvement. It is less useful as a means to provide specific performance data per se, since the scales require the use of judgment by the observer. In developing the CCS we have tried to recognize that supervision is a legitimate science, but that its effective practice is an art.

## CONFERENCE CATEGORY SYSTEM

### ANALYSIS FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUPERVISOR</th>
<th>TEACHER</th>
<th>DATE</th>
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### ANALYSIS SCALES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OCCURRENCE</th>
<th>EFFECTIVENESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Not evident</td>
<td>1. Not effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Slightly evident</td>
<td>2. Slightly effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Moderately evident</td>
<td>3. Moderately effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Quite evident</td>
<td>4. Quite effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Not applicable</td>
<td>N Not applicable</td>
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### CATEGORIES (Parts A&B Correspond to Occurrence and Effectiveness in the Analysis Scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Climate</td>
<td>A. Supervisor makes comments specifically intended to affect the climate. B. Supervisor's statements release tension and contribute to productive communication. This includes expressions of support and encouragement, stated in a comfortable, relaxing tone.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Target Setting</td>
<td>A. Supervisor designates intended conference content. B. Supervisor explains the purpose of the conference, possible outcomes, and items to be included. The teacher is given the opportunity to approve these and suggest others. The resulting agenda is attended to in the conference.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Questioning</td>
<td>A. Supervisor employs questions as an essential means of pursuing conference targets. B. Supervisor uses a questioning strategy thoughtfully and purposefully to encourage the teacher to reflect, analyze, and evaluate. Questions which focus, probe, clarify, which transcend the obvious and mundane, are posed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Commentary</td>
<td>A. Supervisor clarifies ideas and provides information and suggestions. B. Supervisor remarks are descriptive rather than judgmental. Pertinent information is provided incisively. Comments are appropriate and substantive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Praise</td>
<td>A. Supervisor praises and encourages when opportune. B. Praise is used judiciously and authentically to commend teacher ideas and performance. Praise is specific in most instances.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Nonverbal</td>
<td>A. Communication other than through voice occurs. B. Supervisor has a pleasant facial expression, smiles as appropriate. Speech is accompanied by gestures. Nonverbal behavior communicates interest and enthusiasm. Touching may occur if appropriate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Balance</td>
<td>A. Communication occurs in both directions. B. Supervisor is a patient and attentive listener. Supervisor elicits ample teacher involvement, usually talks less than the teacher.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Sensitivity</td>
<td>A. Supervisor acts on the teacher's behalf. B. Supervisor is alert to emotional and conditional factors, to verbal and nonverbal cues, and responds appropriately, often with climate building comments. Supervisor avoids self-serving behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Closure</td>
<td>A. Supervisor uses a culminating technique. B. Supervisor reviews, or causes the teacher to review, the major outcomes of the conference: understandings, solutions, plans, and especially commitment.</td>
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