

The Principal

MILDRED DAVID AND CLAIRE LENZ

Can We Talk?

When Joan Rivers is ready to tell her audience what is really on her mind, she asks her famous question, "Can we talk?" We used the Joan Rivers approach at Hewlett Elementary School to find out what was really on our minds.

Teachers often feel pressured, isolated, and frustrated, and they rarely have the opportunity to discuss individual concerns with an administrator. To give them time to share thoughts and ideas, I provided 45 minutes of released time at the end of the school day for "Can We Talk?" sessions. I wondered to what degree the teachers would take risks and speak out.

Teachers met by grade level in my cozy book-lined office. The school psychologist and the social worker joined us. In this relaxed setting, while enjoying coffee and refreshments, teachers began to speak openly. These meetings were not a time for me to offer explanations but to listen. This passive role was particularly difficult for me as I like to jump right in to solve the problem. Rather than offering solutions, I restated issues raised by the teachers to assure them that I was truly hearing what they said.

After the first series of meetings, the psychologist, social worker, and I reviewed the concerns teachers had raised by examining both the spoken and unspoken messages. We identified problems common to a number of grade levels and issues particular to specific groups.

Our review revealed some themes universal to the teaching profession in the 1980s. Teachers spoke about the pressures of accountability and the curriculum mandates from the central office and the state-mandated Regents Action Plan. They expressed concern about the need for communication among grade levels and special area teachers. They were frustrated with

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scheduling and the number of pull-out programs that fragment instruction. We also discussed other issues, such as the lack of values stemming from the decline of the family.

At the second series of meetings, we considered items that were major priorities for the teachers at all grade levels. A tentative plan of action was presented; this was then revised, based on teacher suggestions. For example, we addressed the concern over insufficient time to exchange ideas by setting aside faculty meetings for this purpose. Teachers would meet in small grade-level groups and establish their own agendas based on their perceived needs.

In many respects, the 1980s can be viewed as the best of times and the worst of times for teachers and administrators. Salaries are higher, working conditions better, and teacher empowerment has become a reality. Yet, although the status of the profession has grown, teachers are still experiencing the stress of trying to "do it all."

The effective principal must have a sixth sense for detecting the stress level in the school. Teachers often voice their concerns and find solutions to their problems within the school's informal communications network. When this usual pattern is unsuccessful, the principal must provide means for the faculty

to release pressures and keep a positive perspective.

The results of asking "Can we talk?" are quite different for the principal than for Joan Rivers. The principal must be ready to dialogue openly with teachers, accepting criticism without anger or resentment. Then, the sensitive administrator can modify his or her behavior, reassign priorities, and change systems for greater efficiency and satisfaction. In the long run, the "Can We Talk?" concept may generate the same rapport between principals and teachers that it has for Joan Rivers and her fans. □

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