

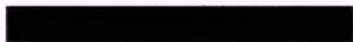
A Superintendent and a Principal Write to Each Other

Using a dialogue journal helped these administrators learn firsthand what they were asking their teachers to do.

In September 1989, the York Region Board of Education, just north of Toronto, Ontario, implemented a new Supervision for Growth plan for all teachers. The new plan differentiates between an administrative track for probationary teachers and teachers seeking promotion and a growth track for successful teachers with a permanent contract. The administrative track involves a formal evaluation with a teacher rating. The growth track enables principals and teachers to explore a variety of innovative processes for carrying out a two- or three-year Supervision for Growth plan. Removing the annual evaluation with a rating results in a dramatically changed relationship.

The key to the success of the growth track is the teacher's ownership of the plan—what the teacher wants to do! It allows a principal to work as a catalyst, to help a teacher clarify an area that the teacher wants to improve. By giving both the principal and the teacher opportunities to develop an innovative program, explore a new area of expertise, or conduct research, the growth track shifts the teacher/principal relationship from a model of dependence and control to one of shared collegiality that leads to excitement, challenge, and growth.

But it is not easy to tell someone how to do this when you've never done it yourself. So we—a principal (Neil Beatty) and his superintendent (Jerry Diakiw)—decided to encourage reflective practice by starting a dialogue journal. We used a small 200-page spiral binder to write back and forth to each other reflectively. On



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average, we used it to make responses to each other about once every two weeks. The following brief excerpts illustrate the process as we used it.

A Starting Point

Superintendent: I've been thinking about a starting point for identifying a direction for growth. Donald Schon suggested starting with questions such as *What do you like most about your job? What do you do, specifically, that excites you or rewards you most?*

Principal: I'd have to say that being able to effect change is, in a broad sense, what I most enjoy about the job. I've enjoyed helping to create a vision with the staff, then, via a deliberate, yet ever-changing plan, helping to move the staff, step by step, toward that vision.

As part of this process I also enjoy the creativity which I've been able to express in the achievement of our goals and objectives—I never imagined how creative one could be as a principal, but I now can see that the opportunities are endless.

Superintendent: "Enjoyment of your job as a process of change" surprised me because that's what I would say too. Inherent in the way both of us do that, however, is the way we try to



Writing to each other about hopes, dreams, fears, and frustrations is not always easy. Each person risks revealing his own imperfections and insecurities. But this principal and superintendent were able to confront serious issues, give feedback and support to each other, and expand their understanding of both roles.

bring about change. We tend not to mandate, but rather create an environment for people to "buy in," to use a cliché. Introducing a new idea and watching people get excited about it, then implementing it, rewards me. A professional can go along nicely for years and suddenly catch fire and in some sort of "Buddha moment" step up into a higher level of consciousness or awareness. Somehow I see this happening for me more often now than at any time in my career. Professional reading also gives me a lot of pleasure. I was virtually a nonreader of professional literature 10 years ago. Now I read voraciously.

I've got to be close to the action. I've got to be part of identifying our own emerging needs. I've got to have my own pet projects to fight for. Starting, supporting, sustaining, and creating new initiatives gives me a great deal of pleasure. But perhaps more important than creating and supporting innovations is learning to create an environment where principals and teachers feel empowered to take risks to try something new that will hook them into an elevated state of professional-

ism—with or without an implementation plan!

Exploring Our Roles

Principal: One of the pleasant surprises I've discovered about the principalship is that I continue to be very much a teacher. The image of my staff as my class has become increasingly strong over the years. In my first year at the school I was fairly directive, establishing routines, structures, and expectations. Once established, I could loosen up, have some fun, and begin turning control for the direction of the school back over to the students and the staff. Now, with increasing confidence in myself and my "class," I am turning over control for decision making almost entirely to the class.

As I refine my teaching skills, I find myself wanting more and more to emulate these skills demonstrated by the excellent teachers I've had the privilege of working with. I guess ultimately I'd like to run the school in the way Jean runs her kindergarten.

You mentioned you would like to teach again someday. But you've never stopped teaching! The principals are

your students, and your influence spreads to thousands of students in our schools. . . .

Superintendent: I agree, we never do stop teaching even as administrators. However, the ratio of teaching time to administrative time is significant. The amount of time I spend responding to complaints, incidents, unhappy parents, disgruntled teachers, and dealing with administrative detail preoccupies my workday. . . .

Area superintendents can be so deluged with the onslaught of budgets, trustees, new schools, projections, boundaries, and staffing that they have little time for other things. The other side of the coin is that problem solving at a fast clip, creative thinking, effective delegating, and hard work can be intoxicating, invigorating, and satisfying. However, I'd quit if that's all I did. I try to force myself into an instructional role on the premise that "by your fruits they shall know thee." I want to be perceived as an educator, not an administrator, so I keep up to date on current learning theory. I meet with as many teacher groups as possible—lead teachers, librarians, and priority representatives to demonstrate current theories and instructional strategies and to urge risk-taking and innovation.

Bristling at Each Other

Superintendent: [In response to an entry of the principal regarding the superintendent's administrative style] Your last entry was provocative, and I think erroneous. . . . You are an excellent principal, but you're still a little green and don't yet know what you don't know. Only a little more time will suffice. There's a touch of overconfidence, perhaps (I can remember the taste myself in my second year as a principal). It's largely to the good, but not all good. You remind me a wee bit of the sign I saw in an office over the holidays. "Hire a teenager now, while he still knows everything."

Principal: Yes, you're right, my statements about your style and mine were provocative and arrogant. Your response this week hit me like a slap in the face. I've had so little criticism in

recent years that I fear I have lost perspective. It's very interesting, however, that you noticed this cockiness because I've seen it in myself. . . . I recently set as another personal objective to practice my listening skills and bite my tongue more often. I'd hate to be perceived as a cocky know-it-all—but I may have recognized this in myself a little too late.

After having said all this, it bothers me greatly that I can't benefit from your immediate reaction. Have I gone too far? Have I been provocative again—without recognizing it? Have I any business asking these questions and saying my opinion of what you should do? Am I simply reinforcing your perception of me as a cocky "rookie" who has much to learn?

Oh well, such are the risks one takes in being candid and thinking out loud.

Superintendent "A slap in the face" is rather a violent action. I hope my comments didn't smart that much! I detect a wee bit of the "I think I've gone too far" syndrome in your remarks. You are unnecessarily apologetic and deferential. Please don't ever defer to me. It's a form of anti-risk-taking.

Principal: [Added later in the margin of the journal] These were significant statements for me—opening the door to further risk-taking.

Stretched Too Thin?

Superintendent: I throw this next point out for debate and discussion: Are you overextending yourself through your endeavors in the school and the board?

You don't want to miss out on anything so you keep committing yourself and your staff to ever-increasing demands: Early Reading Intervention Project, Curriculum and the Learner Initiative, Transition Years, Primary Reading, Control Theory and Quality Schools, The Math/Science Priority, and Conflict Manager program, to name just a few. You have this way of rationalizing each new initiative that you take on by describing it as a subtheme of some other project. In the process you end up being out of the school an inordinate amount of time.

Principal: Am I overextending myself? This question has caused me to do a good deal of reflective thinking over the past week. My answer is *NO*. Well, maybe. I'm not sure. Probably. No, I don't think so . . . ???

Yes, I can't seem to get enough action. Everything seems to interest me. I'm not sure why I keep taking on things. Partly it's pure interest, partly to learn something new which I can bring to my school, partly to be part of something exciting at the area or regional level, partly I suppose to build my profile (although I don't like to admit it).

I try always to watch myself and try to determine if I am losing effectiveness in other areas because of a project in which I'm involved. So far I don't feel like this has happened to any great extent.

I think I've been able to maintain my family time by being available almost every night and weekend to help take the kids to soccer, T-ball, and music.

I don't think superintendents should put a limit on what principals take on unless they determine that there is an actual problem. If you think my school is suffering, then tell me in what ways. If you think I'm suffering, then tell me. But to establish a general rule or quota doesn't make sense. I've known principals who seldom left the school but were highly inept. I've also known principals who were out a great deal, but their presence was felt throughout the school whether they were there or not—and long after they moved on to another job.

Personal Disappointments

Superintendent: I'm shocked you didn't pass the Supervisory Officer oral examination. Surprisingly, if I had to say why they didn't pass you, I'd say it was probably a feeling that "he's so young, let him mature a year to two—he's got lots of time."

I don't agree with that position, but you couldn't fail it on your lack of knowledge and experience. How do you feel about it—I mean, *really* feel about it?

Principal: When I was told I hadn't passed, I was totally shocked. I felt so

good about the interview I thought there was no way I wouldn't get it. I felt that I was totally prepared, and I presented myself with confidence, with a sense of humor and passion about issues I knew well. I'm sure I wasn't cocky, but I guess I was "green," and it showed.

It was very difficult for me to chair the curriculum meeting two hours after I heard the news. It was very difficult telling my wife and kids, my secretary and staff, my friends and colleagues, all of whom had been so supportive and so hopeful for me. But I did tell as many people as I could, as soon as I could in order to get that difficulty out of the way and out of my system.

The Planning Process

Principal: [As part of an ongoing debate about the dangers of overplanning vs. thriving on chaos] . . . To be perfectly honest, I must admit that some of my best plans were created after the fact! Perhaps at this stage in my career, it's just politically astute to espouse the importance of a carefully, collaboratively developed implementation plan for change!

Superintendent: I was intrigued by your comment about writing a comprehensive implementation plan for the Supervisory Officers exam but that you don't have one in your school! Tch! Tch! It raises questions in my mind that have always troubled me—the technico-rational world of management by objective, strategic plans, and a logical, sequential "systems" approach vs. a clear vision coupled with "chaos" emerging to order and then vision fulfillment. I've always felt beaten to death by the former (and undervalued by the latter).

Bennis' book *On Becoming a Leader*,¹ which we have been discussing, explores this issue. There has to be a happy balance between action and planning; I like to make things happen and get things done. I have a bias for action—usually with a fair degree of innovation thrown in. I've loved that part of my career more than anything—the doing, the action. "Start small, think big" and "don't overplan or overmanage" were fun-

damental implementation principles for me long before they became catchy phrases.

Principal: It would appear that in the past five years in this school, this whole process has been deliberately planned by me. While I like to present it to others (principals, teachers, supervisory officers, anyone who will listen) as a carefully developed, long-term plan, it was really not so. It seemed to evolve based on an intuitive sense of what should happen next. But now that I look back, I think I could make use of such a plan when I move on to another school. The hard part will be determining where in the continuum the school is and being patient enough to take one step at a time to move in the desired direction.

Reflections on the Dialogue

Principal: While I've rambled on again, I feel you've helped me get

focused and develop a concrete action plan. Your comments and suggested readings are causing me to think hard about my concept of leadership and the change process. At the same time that I'm trying to figure out myself, I find myself trying to figure you out!

My half-hour drive to and from school each day is often devoted to reflecting upon what you said and what I want to say in response. Never having dialogued in this manner before, I am amazed at how much the process causes me to think and sort out my thoughts.

The process of getting to know a person through a dialogue journal like this continually intrigues me. Since the last entry I've debated with myself how far I could/should go with my remarks to you. While I'd like to debate on equal terms, every once in a while I'm reminded of the fact that you are my boss—you can affect my career! To become too chummy in our dialogue

may become awkward for either of us. Based on your last entry I feel better about erring on the side of being honest, having fun, being provocative, and enjoying the "cut and parry" of debate.

I've been wondering what you get out of this process. Does it allow you to be reflective? Do you find it time-consuming? Do you do it primarily for me or for both of us?

Superintendent: Writing in this sustained manner over the last eight months has been a revelation. . . .

I certainly have thought more deeply and more often on what I do, how I do it, and why I do it than ever before. Personal reflective writing of this type is an intense thinking, clarifying, and learning experience. When James Thurber was asked what he thought about something, he quickly replied "How do I know what I think until I write it down?" Exactly! Many times as I began my entry, I didn't really know what I thought. I do now. I'm certainly enjoying the experience a great deal.

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Credibility and Empathy

Neil Beatty is now using dialogue journals with several of his teachers on the Supervision for Growth track. Because both of us experienced feelings of alarm and uncertainty in our exchange, we can empathize with the teachers as they move from a supervision model of dependence and control to one of shared collegiality. But we also felt the excitement, challenge, and growth that can occur as this happens, and we can now recommend the use of journals to others. □

¹W. Bennis, (1989), *On Becoming a Leader*, (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley).

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