



FEEDBACK:

# A Critical Skill for New Leaders

By Peter DeWitt, EdD

*He needs to take into account all the time it takes to carry out the actual details of his big visions. He dreams big, but the rest of us live out the nightmare of the work.*

*- Anonymous Teacher*



At some point we were all new leaders. Some of you reading this article may be knee-deep into your first year, or getting ready to start your first experience as a building leader. **Building leaders often find themselves in the middle of district initiatives and the needs and wants of the teachers they work with on a daily basis.**

Leadership is often complicated, but when we get it right, it can have a big impact on student learning and teacher growth. Leadership at its best, can bring a whole school community together.

Unfortunately, one of the most important elements of leadership is often ignored, or becomes one-sided, and that is feedback. Leaders often feel it's their job to provide effective feedback but they don't believe, or aren't always open to, accepting feedback of the stakeholders in their school community.

In a recent Finding Common Ground blog (DeWitt, 2016), readers were asked what feedback would they offer to their leaders if they could. The response was fairly overwhelming, and the comments provided were both positive and negative. Many of the respondents mentioned that they are not normally asked to provide feedback to their leaders. Leaders take note, whether you are a veteran or brand-new, ask for feedback, and do something about the feedback provided.

Most of the issues that teachers wrote about dealt with communication and vision. For example, one teacher wrote, "Communication implies two-way dialogue. Our principal is good at getting information disseminated however staff NEVER has a chance to share issues and concerns. When we have tried, she brings in Human Resources."

A teacher from the UK wrote that her principal,

"Communicates his vision for the school in the long term. Nearly a year into his headship and I have no idea what he actually

wants the school to be like in five years time. He uses the school motto, which I still do not remember but it is plastered on walls. He does not underpin values within the school."

That type of feedback offered by the teacher from the UK could go a long way to helping a principal understand they have a lack of clarity where their vision is concerned, which will only lead to increased frustration on the part of staff. Unfortunately, not all leaders, or people in general, take kindly to feedback, which is sad because it could help them grow as leaders and teachers.

### THANKS FOR THE FEEDBACK

I was a principal for nearly eight years, and worked with a great staff that provided me with feedback that I liked, and other feedback that I wished I never heard. From a building perspective, the feedback we receive from staff and our school community is typically the only feedback we receive. Although many building leaders are working to change the consistency and authenticity of the formal observation process with their teachers, the formal observation process from central office to building still has a long way to go. Building leaders are sometimes left up to their own devices to understand what they need to improve on because some districts are too overly concerned with test scores and compliance, as opposed to real learning opportunities. Given that sad commentary, building leaders really need to work with their teachers as opposed to against them.

Feedback is essential to our growth as leaders and teachers, and we need to find ways to open up the lines of communication so that we all receive and provide the most effective feedback. Unfortunately, not everyone is open to feedback. For example, one teacher wrote, "My principal is not a democratic leader. In fact she is very controlling and when someone disagrees with her she becomes

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vindictive and critical."

Over the years I have done a great deal of research on feedback because I work with John Hattie, and feedback is an important element of his visible learning research, which encompasses well over 1,500 meta-analyses involving more than 300 million students. Feedback, which is considered an influence on learning, has an effect size of .75, which is well over the hinge point of .40 which researchers agreed long ago equates to a year's worth of growth for a year's input. It is one of the six influences all leaders should be focusing on in their daily practices (DeWitt, 2016).

Through Hattie's research we have learned that there are three types of academic feedback we need to know in order to improve teaching and learning. Those three types of feedback are task, process, and self-regulation. The levels of feedback we provide are contingent on the level of learning that the teacher or students already have before we give it. For example, new learning requires task-level feedback, and a high degree of proficiency requires self-regulation feedback.

### THE ART OF RECEIVING FEEDBACK

However, as important as feedback is to give, it's also hard to receive. In *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, \*even when it's off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and, frankly, you're not in the mood (Penguin, 2014), Stone and Heen's research shows us that there are three feedback triggers we give off when we receive feedback. Those three feedback triggers are truth triggers, which means the feedback is untrue; relationship triggers, which means that we don't think the person



giving it to us has any credibility; and identity triggers, which means the feedback is destroying the identity we have created for ourselves.

Additionally, Stone and Heen have found in their research that there are three types of feedback we hope to receive, which are appreciative (You worked hard! Great job!), coaching (Here's a better way to do it), and evaluative (Here's where you stand).

Over the years that we have all led, we have hopefully been in tune with the teachers, students and parents around us, and have learned a great deal from their personal stories but also the feedback they have given to us. Personally, I have always felt that most of the school community that surrounded me wanted me to be successful as a leader, so their feedback was invaluable. Unfortunately, I did not always know that when I began my leadership career because I was concerned that I had to know everything already. We need more new leaders to understand that they don't need to know everything already, and that's why feedback is so vitally important.

**WHAT DO NEW LEADERS NEED TO KNOW?**

So, what does this have to do with the advice we would give new leaders? A great deal, because being a leader means we have to begin by asking for, giving and receiving feedback. It begins with listening to what people are saying when they are talking to you. Listening sounds really easy, but the reality is that the principal's office can be a revolving door of people who want something from you, and merely walking down the hallway to go to the bathroom becomes an impossible venture because people stop to talk with you and share their issues or successes. Many times leaders half listen in order to quickly solve an issue before they hear the whole thing.

For example, one of the most important comments that came through the survey I conducted was,

He thinks he listens but every time you start talking to him, he interrupts to tell you what he thinks about the topic. It's his first

year in the school and he isn't taking the time to get to know the people or why things look the way they look at this time. If he could stop talking long enough to hear from the community he leads, it would be a great benefit to him.

The comment from the teacher above complements something that Governour principal Vicki Day said to me, which is,

New leaders need to step back, listen, and build relationships. Listen to what teachers, staff, and parents are saying. Step back and be reflective in your practice. To this day, I do not have all of the answers, but I listen and support, question, inquire, and grow with every single person in the building. It's about collective teamwork and collaboration that can bring the entire school forward to new levels and avenues for all to grow and learn.

Day is referring to the need to move together collaboratively. In Hattie's research we know that collective teacher efficacy has an effect size of 1.57, which can have an enormous impact on student and adult learning in a school. However, new leaders need to understand that they do not have to be the lead learners. What they need to do is set up a dynamic where everyone can share their collective expertise.

My friend Simon Feasey, Head Teacher (principal) at Bader Elementary School in Thornaby-on-Tees, UK, writes,

So that a drive for collective expertise be established and valued from the off, I would instigate a conversation around norms for collaboration such as those suggested by Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman: equity of voice; active listening; respect for all perspectives; maximise time and attention.

For new leaders, it's important to remember that when you create stakeholder groups, or ask for input from staff, that you actually listen to it and look for what Feasey suggests

as equity of voice. One teacher in the survey wrote something that is always very frustrating to teachers, and often happens at the building and district level. They wrote, "Our admin thinks they are getting input when solving a problem, but they normally already have an answer they want and are just trying to convince us that it's right."

When leaders do that, they chip away at the credibility of the process and their own credibility as leaders. Feasey believes that we must have,

An appreciation that change invokes a sense of vulnerability. So, an open discussion with all around what Brené Brown terms 'leaning into discomfort' and embracing change. Critically, though, that change should be driven through 'power with' rather than 'power over' others.

It's something Lisa Meade, Hudson Falls School District director of pupil personnel, and SAANYS' 2015 Middle School Principal of the Year, has focused on in the past. The need to change and improve takes work. Meade says,

Change can be hard and perhaps even more so for adults. Arriving to a new school as a student, teacher, or as a leader requires a certain amount of courage. People may not understand your intentions at first. Some will want to assume the worst while others (hopefully more than most) will not. It can be a steep learning curve to figure out how all the people and pieces of a new place fit together. So piece-by-piece, interaction-by-interaction, I've tried to be genuine and consistent. I've accepted that building the capacity I had (after ten years) will need time to rebuild here.

**IN THE END**

When we are put into a leadership position our first thought is that we have to change the way the school is run. I believe the most important aspect of leadership is to listen and get a sense for the school culture, and how to make the school climate more conducive to building the collective efficacy of teachers and students.

It means listening to families and engaging them in what they want out of school.

ICLE senior fellow, author and former high school principal Eric Sheninger agrees. Sheninger wrote to me saying,

The key to first year success is not changing things quickly just for the sake of change. It is critical to make astute observations on the current school culture. Equally important is allocating time and creating pathways to elicit and listen to feedback from all stakeholder groups. These simple strategies will help to articulate the what, why, and how when the time is right to implement needed change.

New leaders need to understand that their job is to foster a school climate where students, teachers and families feel valued. They do that through stepping back and listening to the feedback offered by

those stakeholder groups so they can get a sense for how to move forward. Internationally recognized leadership expert Andy Hargreaves provided these points for new leaders to consider. They are:

- Take time to understand the past
- Openly acknowledge the value of the best of the past
- Meet with your predecessor unless they did something illegal or corrupt
- Act as if you can trust people, until you can't
- Affirm core values
- Establish in a clear but low profile way codes of conduct about how you will do business together.
- Say what you bring, what you will need help with, and what they can offer

Leadership has a great deal of power, and that power should be used to bring people together through building bridges as opposed to segregating them through building walls.

PETER DEWITT, EdD, is the author of several books, including the best selling *Collaborative Leadership: 6 Influences That Matter Most* (September, 2016, Corwin Press/Learning Forward), and the forthcoming *Collaborative Leadership: A Collective Efficacy Approach to Improving School Climate* (Corwin Press, 2017). He runs workshops focusing on Visible Learning, Instructional Coaching, and Collaborative Leadership in the UK, North America, and Australia.



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