

Improving Schools from Within

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Improving Schools One Conversation at a Time

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High-quality classroom teaching is a national pursuit: we want to improve student learning, close achievement gaps, and increase graduation rates, and we share societal, political, and economic reasons for desiring these outcomes. The field is not short of strategies for pursuing instructional improvement, including new curricula, new instructional strategies, data teams, and even learning walks. Yet even when smart people are working incredibly hard to implement research-based interventions, the results often fall short of expectations. In districts across the nation, leaders are dissatisfied with the results of years—even decades—of effort aimed at systematic school improvement.

What gets in the way? The reasons are many and varied, yet the authors' collective experience in the field suggests an important pattern: the successful execution of nearly every initiative, no matter its content, comes down to what Bossidy and Charan call "the basic unit of work"—that is, individuals' ability to have the right conversations at the right time with the right people. Any educational change effort requires learning, and most initiatives rely on person-to-person conversation to foster that learning—for example, feedback from a principal to her staff after learning walks or a conversation between an instructional coach and a teacher about how to implement a new curriculum.

Surprisingly often, educators either avoid these "learning conversations" or conduct them poorly, diminishing the potential of the chosen improvement strategy to catalyze professional learning and ultimately change the practice. It is tempting to frame the major barrier to these conversations as a lack of courage or will on the part of those who should be initiating them. We suggest, instead, that the problem represents a lack of skill. Conversations that lead to learning require a specific skill set as well as a shared understanding of purpose, which in turn requires training and support for all involved.

Four Essentials

There are four essential attributes to successful learning conversations. First, conduct learning conversations with a spirit of shared inquiry and mutual support for professional

learning. This stands in contrast to the one-way transmission of information that is common in the conversations among educators, especially between supervisors and teachers. Second, ground learning conversations in data and evidence. Third, build learning conversations on the understanding that all individuals bring their own assumptions, experiences, and mental models to bear on those data. Reaching a shared understanding may not be straightforward or easy. And fourth, use learning conversations to lead those involved to construct new knowledge and insights.

Some educational change initiatives, including the widely popular movement to create PLCs and data teams, are built around the argument for such generative conversations. We are not the first to argue for their place in advancing the adult learning necessary for real instructional change. However, the need for learning conversations does not exist solely in PLCs and data teams. It is at the heart of every educational improvement initiative that aims to change the practice.

What School and District Leaders Can Do

Schools and districts benefit from acknowledging the importance of the learning conversation in educational improvement and investing in it. What can you do?

- 1. Identify your learning conversations.** Examine your core improvement strategies and identify the specific moments in which you expect staff members' beliefs, attitudes, skills, or practices to change. Notice how many changes depend on conversation and exchange, such as
 - a. Developing a shared understanding of what high-quality instruction looks like.
 - b. Using data to guide conversations about where instructional practice falls short.
 - c. Discussing practices that effectively meet particular student needs.
 - d. Analyzing why data teams often fail to get to improved instructional practice.
 - e. Planning high-quality instruction.
 - f. Reflecting on what did and did not work with recent instruction.

Take time to plan where and when those conversations will take place and chart how to involve participants in each one.

2. Invest in skill building. Once you have identified the key learning conversations embedded within your core improvement strategies, make sure that all individuals involved in the conversations receive training and support. Learning to engage in an effective learning conversation is a lifelong pursuit that depends on obtaining a host of skills and dispositions. To encourage these conversations among school leaders and faculty, we suggest focusing professional development on the following skills:

- Framing purposeful conversations and establishing agreed-upon outcomes
- Selecting and presenting appropriate data for consideration
- Listening carefully to what someone else is saying and suppressing the need to talk

- Being sensitive to clues about what others value and are worried about
- Asking questions that help others activate their prior knowledge, uncover assumptions, and generate ideas
- Identifying connections across seemingly disparate perspectives

Frequently, leaders only train educators whom they see as the "feedback givers"—that is, those who have something important or powerful to tell others. We encourage training everyone who plans on engaging in learning conversations for two reasons: learning to receive feedback is as important as learning to give it, and the ethos of the learning conversation is about mutual professional learning rather than a dialogue between a master and apprentice.

3. Monitor the existence and quality of the learning conversations. Don't just assume these conversations will take place. They often do not. Gathering evidence as to whether and when these conversations happen, however, is not enough. These conversations need to foster meaningful learning, challenge existing organizational practices, and develop new skills and understandings. Ultimately, what matters is whether the conversations deliver the intended results. If professional learning community discussions are supposed to lead to collectively altered instructional practice, does that practice occur? If supervisory post-observation sessions are intended to prompt introspection, is there evidence that teachers are more reflective as a result? If learning walk debriefs are meant to create ownership of instructional patterns and commitment to work on high-priority areas, does anything improve? Gather evidence related to these questions and use the data as a basis for subsequent learning conversations.

Leveraging the power of a school-improvement strategy requires more than setting up the calendar and providing high-quality professional development. We must also make sure that the strategy is translated into instructional improvement through discussion of collective meaning making, new understandings of instructional patterns, increased expectations for the kinds of tasks students can tackle, and extensive knowledge of what creating such tasks entails. If our ultimate aim is to make instructional changes that will lead to improvements in student learning, we must engage in the dialogue that is likely to help change our practice.

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