

Questions to Ponder When Coaching Employees

Point 12 in Dr. W. Edwards Deming's 14 Points for Management reads, "Remove barriers that rob people of pride of workmanship. Eliminate the annual rating or merit system." When the 14 Points are restated as Obligations for the School Board and Administration, this point becomes, "Remove barriers that rob staff and administrators of pride of workmanship and that rob students of the joy of learning. This means, *inter alia*, abolish annual ratings of staff and the system of grading student performance."¹

The essence of Point 12 calls for the elimination of annual ratings for staff and abolishing the system of grading student performance. This is not to suggest that leaders no longer provide feedback to staff members and students; quite the opposite. Unfortunately, traditional practices of appraisal and grading – which this point calls to abolish – fail to provide helpful feedback.

After all, what is a grade? More than half a century ago, Michigan State University's Paul Dresser defined it as follows: "A grade is an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite amount of material."²

More than half a century after Dresser's observation, and decades after Deming's death, the destruction continues. In the *Wall Street Journal*, Samuel Culbert noted, "It's time to finally put the performance review out of its misery. This corporate sham is one of the most insidious, most damaging, and yet most ubiquitous of corporate activities. Everybody does it, and almost everyone who's evaluated hates it. It's a pretentious, bogus practice that produces absolutely nothing any thinking executive could call a corporate plus."³

In America's schools, many administrators are saddled with state-mandated systems that emphasize teacher appraisal and ranking, often to the detriment of coaching and development. (Some are so burdensome that districts must seek additional state funding to hire per-diem evaluators!⁴) Such practices too often prove to be barriers to staff members feeling good about themselves and their work. Instead of solid plans for training and development, traditional appraisal practices generate resentment and fear. Later, when the evaluations are used to drive individual recognition and reward systems, teamwork suffers.

Questions to Address in Your Next Review

Leaders in the short term can shift their staff reviews from a mode of appraising past performance to one of coaching and planning for future development. Even with current systems for ranking, during review discussions leaders can collaborate with their employees to seek and take action on answers to the following questions.⁵

- Do I know what this person must do in order to succeed in this job?

- Who are the user/customers of the results and outputs of this job?
 - What do the customers need in order to best use the results of this job?
 - Who supplies the inputs to this job? Are those inputs suitable for use?
- Have I discussed the above with this employee so that there is a clear understanding of what he or she needs to do?
 - Have I provided this employee with the necessary resources to do this job well (tools, training, time, equipment, information, good material, and so on)?
 - What does this person see as the major barriers to doing this job well? What have I done to remove those barriers?
 - Have I asked what this employee needs from me to do this job well?
 - Do I know this person's needs as an individual?
 - Am I acting as a coach and a teacher in this review, as opposed to simply grading past performance?
 - Have I provided opportunities for in-depth discussions with this person about this job and its objectives?
 - What objectives should I set for developing this person as an asset? (training, education, retraining, new experiences, involvement in process improvement projects, helping others, etc.)

Notes

¹J.F. Leonard, *The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America's Schools*, ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI (1996), p. 171.

²P. Dresser in *Basic College Quarterly*, Michigan State University, Lansing, MI (Winter, 1957), p. 6.

³S. Culbert, "Yes, Everyone Really Does Hate Performance Reviews," *wsj.com*, April 11, 2010.

⁴A. Shea, "Teacher Evaluation Program May be Burdensome for Staff," *Norwich Bulletin*, Norwich, CT (April 14, 2013), p. A1.

⁵Derived from "Deming's Point Seven: Adopt and Institute Leadership," *Commentaries on Deming's Fourteen Points*, Ohio Quality and Productivity Forum, Piqua, OH (1989), pp. 4-5.