

# It's the Reflection That Refreshes

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Shortly after the start of the school year at a middle school team leaders' meeting, a teacher commented that returning to work each fall was like "going from zero to sixty in the first thirty days and never letting your foot off the gas peddle." Her analogy was fitting for that particular school year and the conversation that ensued allowed others at the table to share their own sense of pressure and rush as they endeavored to do the best for all students. It was one of those special moments when educators shared openly with each other and learned much in the process.

This instance of reflection was spontaneous. There was no plan for such introspection but the moment was right and the need was there. But some other factors were in play. The number of people around the table was small (less than ten) and they had some history of doing the business of decision making at the school. The principal had the presence of mind to allow the sharing and, in turn, the emotions. The others around the table listened thoughtfully and provided a receptive audience to the person speaking. The whole environment was correct, and it was cultivated appropriately as the meeting progressed. This was a professional learning community (PLC) and the educators valued the time together, the opportunity to share and the pause that refreshed everyone.

## **Reflection defined**

At the heart of such an experience is the notion of reflection, the art of taking the time to slow down and look discerningly at what is going on. In order to take full advantage of PLCs or even that occasional "right moment" at a meeting, the professional educators must have opportunity to reflect. Those reflections will by the nature of the job carry emotions such as joy, sorrow, elation, confusion, frustration, and others. Because children are the client, the teacher knows only a portion of what to expect on any given day. Thus the element of surprise can derail the best developed plans for a lesson. When assessing *what happened* in class or in a conference, an educator will need to look within, to reflect, and to express clearly those observations to others. There is a need to sort through the day or week for those details that place light on key elements of the lesson, the job or the issue at hand. And finally there is the direct benefit of sharing those reflections which is to test the insights/decisions with a colleague.

***For purposes of this article the reflection process is best defined as an inward review of events, passed and/or to come, that are then revealed to others. It is a process and not an end. The product is a decision that is driven by the results of the inward review and the sharing.*** A simple example would be the teacher who administers a test, reviews the results and senses that the outcome is not a true indication of the students' learning. She shares this "inward review" with her colleague next door who listens and reviews the test, and the two "decide" an abbreviated second assessment with some modifications in the wording of a few questions in order.

A second example might find a more formal reflection process in place. Under the protocols for Critical Friends Groups (CFG) from the National School Reform Movement, a group of seven principals meet for two uninterrupted hours once a month to review dilemmas that have taken significant time to address at their schools. One principal details the dilemma he/she has experienced and outlines the steps taken to resolve it. Others listen and at a designated point the trained coach for that session requests that all principals reflect on the issue and offer observations and alternatives. The presenting principal listens and later identifies the strategies that she/he heard. Some acknowledgement of sound alternative approaches can be made but is not necessary. In this case the “*inward review*” is once again shared with colleagues and the requisite listening and spontaneous analysis leads to suggestions that will inform future decisions.

In both examples the professional educators have made critical decisions. First and foremost they have reflected. Further they have determined that additional eyes on the details would be beneficial to making a better decision. They have identified the individuals with whom they feel comfort in sharing. One individual clearly has a connection with a colleague next door. The other educator participates in a formal group designed to foster sharing. Each has additional information, strategies, and/or points of view to factor into the next best steps.

### **What Gets in the Way**

The literature provides multiple sources as to what impedes educators from engaging in greater amounts of reflection. The opening comment from a teacher about “zero to sixty” is most fitting. The pace in education over the ten month school year has only become more frenetic in recent years and the accountability placed upon all educators adds to that sense of rush throughout the year. These are factors no doubt when identifying *things that get in the way*. But it can be argued that five basic factors interfere with moving educators toward increased and improved reflection (not in any particular order).

1. A reflective environment is not in place.
2. There is not enough time available for reflection.
3. Educators (administrators and teachers) are resistant to change and that is what time for reflection represents.
4. Leaders in districts/schools set multiple priorities, losing focus.
5. Teamwork still does not receive the emphasis it deserves in education.

Many authors have provided considerable depth to each of these potentially interfering factors. Thus there would be little purpose to repeating that research here. Instead, it is the intent of this article to explore some of the best approaches school leaders can take to tackle *the things that get in the way* of improved reflection.

### **What’s a Leader to Do?**

First and foremost the school leader needs to establish an environment that encourages reflection and sharing. That environment is not just having a schedule that is responsive to teachers wanting to meet, although that certainly is a good beginning. The correct environment is a state of mind among the teachers that the leader establishes and promotes continually throughout the school year. A few examples of such actions are:

- Provide a brief but pointed staff development session at the start of the year at which the principal explains the intent to allow time for reflection. Leaders need

to identify directions and tactics that allow staff to grow in relationship to one another. Be direct about the importance of reaching out to colleagues and explain how the principal will be pursuing this approach all year.

- Begin all faculty meetings with a time for reflection. Give it a name on the printed agenda, such as *reflections*, *connections*, *stop-look-listen*, or *deceleration time*. The principal can reflect on examples of great teaching observed in classrooms or successful problem solving with an upset student. Any teacher is encouraged to share at the start of each meeting during the five minute reflection time noted on the agenda. (One school purchased a dozen roses and invited teachers to take one and present it to a colleague while explaining why.)
- Bring substantive items to faculty meetings for discussion, and publish the agenda far enough in advance to allow teachers time to reflect on the item(s).
- Visit grade level meetings, team meetings, and department meetings regularly and be an expert listener. Reflect on the process of those meetings rather than content.
- Conduct a few walk-throughs in one teacher's classroom and then invite his/her reflections on a lesson. Listen to those reflections and comment on his/her insights rather than making any specific suggestions.
- Seek opportunities for teacher leaders to be groomed. Appoint teachers to committees, present them with their charge and a timetable, and identify a chair the principal sees as a potential leader. Meet with the chair to ascertain their insights into the progress of the committee and ask for their recommendations.

These and other modeling strategies can help establish an environment conducive to reflection.

### **The Ever Elusive Time Factor**

Secondly, the principal should aggressively pursue time. *Available time* is an interesting concept that appears to have no basis in reality during a school year. It feels like there simply isn't any! So begin with the notion that available time must be found and that it can be found. The principal will need to lead the way toward finding time in an apparent "no time available" environment. The following may provide a starting point but most assuredly each school will be different:

- Organize a schedule committee as the year begins. Charge the group to review time use at the school over the course of the year and periodically recommend places where time can be found for reflection and sharing.
- Refine faculty meetings to take 45 minutes or less. The remaining time (depending on contracts) can be offered to teachers to meet and to share.
- Hold faculty meetings every other month and designate the alternate months as time for teams, departments, etc. to share. (These are not extra meeting times for department or team/grade level planning but instead for sharing. Remind teacher leaders and team/department leaders of your mission to allow more sharing.)
- Use the Need-To-Know Memo to communicate important information that can be placed in print, therefore saving meeting time. Establish at the start of the year that the principal's Need-To-Know Memos are considered important and require teacher follow through in some cases. Make the memo format your own, possibly adding little items like the birth of a child or some other personal note along with the critical communications. Publish it at least monthly, but not too often, and on a special color paper.

- Consider using substitute days for coverage in the building to allow teachers to get together. For example, with three substitutes three teachers could be released for a specified time period to share materials, review formative assessments, or review one teacher's dilemma. Possibly three sets of three teachers could be released in a day by rotating the substitutes.
- Offer to cover a teacher's class allowing that teacher to observe another's class where some specific instructional strategies are being employed. This places the principal in classrooms and provides potentially rich exchanges between teachers.

### **Change Can Be Your Friend.**

The "resistant to change" charge against educators (administrators and teachers alike) is a broad sweeping one that ultimately is unfair. The educator ranks are changing at a rapid pace with retirements, leaves for child-rearing (men and women), and the pursuit of alternative careers. Teachers express concern over administrators who stay at a school for only a short time. NCLB, state mandates, IDEA/RTI, and local initiatives around accountability abound. *Change is here, and educators will adjust as well as their leaders equip them for change.* Allow a repeat of the latter portion of that statement. Educators will adjust as well as their leaders equip them for change. Is that always going to be true of all educators? Absolutely not! But the vast majority simply needs to understand the reasons behind the changes brought to them and they need a timetable (or speed limit to maintain the opening analogy). What's a building leader to do to remove "resistance to change" from interfering with reflection?

- Look ahead as far as is possible. No one likes surprises at the work place as there is a sufficient supply of those in the other aspects of a teacher's life. The leader of a building must work to understand the community and how it is changing; the desires of the superintendent; the regulations passed down from the State; and the culture of their own building. The intersection of all those variables marks the sweet spot of change that the leader must explain to the teachers and update them as needed. The accuracy of that interpretation will inform and, to a degree, relax the teachers in a building. Such updates are great material for the Need-To-Know Memo.
- Assess the degree of change (perceived and real) that has been a part of the school in the last couple of years, and reflect that knowledge to the teachers.
- Identify the *loci of power* in the building. Some teachers are natural leaders and have a following. Their voice has power and others listen to them. The leader needs to know who these teachers are and develop a trusting relationship with them. Quite often these teachers are the grade level/team leaders and department heads. Sometimes they are the chair of the Faculty Forum or the Sunshine Club. Seek their opinion and help them to see that the changes on the horizon can be managed.
- Keep teachers involved in the interview and hiring process. The commitment to teamwork demonstrates itself in a rich and fulfilling manner as teachers share their insights into candidates with the leader of the building. This experience of a team working together to build an addition to the team is very powerful.
- The leader should encourage, gently push, and lead teachers toward being trained as mentors for new teachers.
- Seek teacher input for quality professional development programs and where possible use the skill sets of the current faculty to present material on best

practices for the classroom. There will be a reluctance to present to colleagues. Be prepared for this. It is not a resistance but instead a change in practice that requires modeling. Pair up with one or two teachers and present right along with them.

Change comes slowly and yet time is of the essence during the short ten months of schooling. But well planned changes with plenty of notice, support and encouragement by the leader can have a very positive influence.

### **Keeping the Focus the Focus**

“We start one initiative, receive some training, and all of a sudden another and different effort is introduced.” All too often this is a complaint of the teaching staff. In some instances it is a legitimate observation. Programs have been introduced and then a new administrator arrives or the law changes and leaders are asking teachers to accept a new or additional priority. Let’s face it. Principals have the same reaction when told to make those right hand turns at the last minute. It is fair to say that some changes we simply cannot ignore such as the new regulations for IDEA implemented in 2004. But there are strategies the leader of a building can use to keep the focus on a priority until it is legitimately declared accomplished.

- Having yearly school goals and objectives is a powerful tool in the fight against rapid change in priorities. Most states and districts operate in this manner now and in the end it helps with the focus of the school. However, too often these goals are on paper, in a three ring binder, and on a shelf. They are rarely visited during the year. Leaders must assist teachers in linking committee work, parent programs, lesson plans, formative assessments, etc. to the school’s goals.
- Insist on a link between lessons taught in class and the goals for the school. By doing so two things happen. It ensures that teachers will re-visit the goals and objectives regularly and seek the link to their daily work. It also ensures that the goals will be understandable and attainable as teachers seek clarity in the goals they must relate to almost daily.
- Develop a committee to establish the goals for each school year. In some cases that may be an already established group like grade level representatives, a School Council, or a Building Data Team. Once some suggested areas of focus are identified, email the faculty asking for reactions. The process of the next year’s goals should begin in January of the current year to allow reflection on the current year’s growth before setting next year’s priorities.
- The leader has the responsibility to monitor changing priorities. Teacher input is a must, but ultimately the leader must assume responsibility of not taking on something new before the previous goal(s) is declared “done” by the teachers. At the same time the leader needs to keep teachers informed of all indices of progress and help them perceive the school as moving forward.
- Once again the notion of looking ahead is paramount. The leader of the building must be able to prepare the teachers for what is coming and therefore what goals or training will be required. When done properly teachers understand the need for specific training and allocating time for that effort. Such an approach is also reassuring to the staff as they see a leader who is leading them by preparing them.

**“Here’s the thing I learned as a CEO. You succeed or fail based on your team.”  
(Lee Iacocca)**

The final item that can “get in the way” is inattention to teamwork. Lee Iacocca’s book *Where Have All the Leaders Gone* and Jim Collins’ book *Good to Great* are filled with references to teams and the need for the use of them. In each case the authors explain the importance of who is in each position and how the leader encourages (if not demands) teamwork. Few in corporate America work alone any longer as the value of teamwork has been realized as a bonus for the bottom line, namely profitability. Teamwork brings with it a broader range of thinking. Problem-solving is enhanced. The strength of the team becomes its diversity of thought. Education has not emphasized the importance of the teamwork anywhere near enough. The notion that a teacher operates alone in the classroom is the past tense of education. The future is teams sharing ideas and reflecting on the best practices for educating all the children. The building leader, the principal, will need to:

- Put “the right people on the bus” (Collins) and provide leadership in the teamwork ethic.
- Pursue teacher leaders in the building and cultivate their skills as leaders by providing opportunities for them to lead teams.
- As mentioned above, use a committee structure to bring the talented people together and give them latitude to create great solutions.
- Select chairpersons carefully and skillfully.
- Meet regularly with building teams such as grade level teams, middle school teaching teams, team leaders, department heads, and Building Data Teams. Demonstrate through reflections to them that their work matters significantly.
- Bring parents on to specific teams to demonstrate the importance of the community connection and the necessary breath of teams.
- Monitor the progress and performance of the teams and make changes when necessary using sound rationale based on observable results.

### **Zero to Sixty**

The zero to sixty analogy expresses the pace of education, but until something changes in our education calendar it is what it is! However, accepting that reality does not mean educators must be without reflection during the ride. The racing team at the Indy 500 (the driver, the pit crew, the timer, the observers) provides continuous reflection and feedback that the driver uses to make decisions at speeds in excess of one hundred and eighty miles per hour. Surely teachers and administrators can reflect on their craft and make decisions for student learning at a mere sixty.