

STAFF APPRAISAL - PERFORMANCE REVIEW

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In recent years there have been increasing calls for greater teacher accountability. Schools are required to have in place an appraisal programme which monitors teacher performance according to a set of national guidelines. Unfortunately many of these programmes do little to improve student learning. It is my contention that the prime reason for this is the confusion that arises from trying to use one structured process to meet a number of different needs.

I believe three separate processes need to be in place that together directs the school's focus towards high quality teaching and learning.

- (i) A strong whole school development programme which will upskill each teacher and assist the school meet its goals.
- (ii) Individual goal setting and self-reflection to ensure the particular needs of each staff member are being met.
- (iii) A separate and more focused appraisal programme for teachers where competence is an issue.

The draft National Guidelines for Performance Management requires schools to establish an appraisal policy, which includes classroom observations, with performance evaluated against key performance areas relevant to the position. What in fact does this mean? Does it spell a return to the old *inspectorial* models of the past? What are the key performance areas relevant to a position? Who determines what these are? Do they relate solely to the teacher's responsibilities within the classroom or is the role of a teacher within a school more than this? What do *classroom observations* actually mean? Currently many Principals sit in classrooms writing notes based on their perception of a teacher's performance believing this to be the most effective model to improve teacher performance. Is it the most appropriate way to assist teachers grow and develop? Does this model encourage teachers to seek assistance when needed, or to disclose an area they may perceive as a need?

The danger with many appraisal models is that often structures are put in place which monitor all teachers in exactly the same way ignoring the fact that most staff members are highly competent. This seems a little like keeping the whole class in after school when only one student may have been misbehaving. We expect our students to act responsibly, to evaluate their own performance and to respond to positive reinforcement. Is it appropriate to expect less of our teachers?

Many appraisal systems are reliant on the appraiser observing a teacher in the classroom against a set of guidelines that may or may not have been jointly determined. Usually there are two or three such observations during the year. It is difficult to understand how this structure will lead to a change in teacher behaviour. Teachers may temporarily change their behaviour during the time of the appraisal visit but this model is unlikely to lead to a long-term shift. It is what teachers are doing behind closed doors when no one is looking that is the real test.

Helen Gunter (1996), discusses how the appraisal process could be used to assist a school become a *learning school*, where learning is seen as the prime focus. Gunter argues that although it is individuals within an organisation who have the potential to learn, it is too often the case that the focus for improvement on individuals does not lead to an overall improvement in the organisation. Gunter states it is the collective competence of a team that has the potential to establish the learning standards throughout the entire organisation.

Most current appraisal policies focus on attempts to change the behaviour of individuals. This is exceedingly difficult to do. Thomas Guskey (1986) proposed that if staff development programmes are to bring about a real change in the classroom practice of teachers, then first a change in their beliefs and attitudes is needed. Teachers in general tend to teach according to previous experience because they believe they have been successful in the past. Where it is demonstrated that improved results for students can be achieved they are more likely to change.

Guskey would see the three major outcomes of staff development as:

- 1 a change in the classroom practice of teachers.
- 2 a change in learning outcomes for students.
- 3 a change in teacher's attitudes and beliefs.

It is the order of focus that Guskey would see as important for enduring change.

School leaders would be better putting their efforts into changing the culture of the school so that each member feels part of the team and recognises the important role each has in ensuring the school functions well. Improved learning for students is better achieved where there exists a strong team culture and a purposeful staff development programme. A strong team culture encourages all staff members to assist others, knowing they are not competing with their colleagues, but are working collaboratively with them in the best interests of their students. The concept of sharing for the welfare of the team becomes highly developed.

A purposeful staff development programme, where the focus is on pupil needs, works towards upskilling all teachers rather than dwelling on any perceived individual strengths and weaknesses. In this way there is no need for individuals to feel threatened. All can openly seek assistance knowing they will not be judged as a result of their request for help. The focus for improvement is consistently on what can be done to improve learning outcomes for students. Individual improvement comes about through the collective growth of the group.

Michael Fullan (1995) states it has been presumed by implementing site based management; improvements in student achievement will result. In reviewing available evidence Fullan refutes this and argues that in fact site based management on its own may well do very little to make a school more learner oriented. The restructuring may alter the governance procedures but have very little effect on the teaching-learning programmes within the school. He refers to research that illustrates that *successful* restructured schools go beyond mere administrative changes and distinguish themselves by working on changes in the way in which the school can engage in high performance activities, working towards becoming what he refers to as *learning organisations*.

At Bucklands Beach Intermediate we choose to use the term Performance Review to refer to the process more commonly identified as appraisal. We believe this term more aptly describes our process where the intention is to review the performance of individuals against a set of clearly established guidelines, rather than to *appraise* their worth or value.

Our policy is very clear. We see the purpose of monitoring performance as primarily to achieve improved learning outcomes for students through the appropriate professional development of staff. Teachers generally want to do a good job and school leaders should be working to make it easy for them to achieve this end.

Our performance review policy empowers teachers to reflect upon their current practice and engage in high performance activities leading towards improved student learning. This is achieved primarily through staff involvement in the total review process from the initial negotiated job description, through to the recording of their self-assessment against their preset goals. Unless they are involved in the goal setting process there will be neither ownership nor commitment. There will be no strong desire to have goals accomplished.

Following the negotiated setting of the job description each staff member is required to set a minimum of four goals. These are in clearly defined areas. They also record any assistance that may be needed for the goal to be satisfactorily achieved.

- 1 The first goal is related to classroom practice. A teacher's prime responsibility is for the teaching and learning programmes for the students in their care. They are asked to consider, "As a teacher, what can I do to improve my teaching practice?" They record at least one improvement goal to work on during the year. This may be in the area of improved student motivation, classroom management, a better understanding and application of the mathematics curriculum or whatever is selected as a prime area of focus.
- 2 The second goal is to be related to their job description. "As a member of the school team what can I do to support others in my areas of responsibility? What specifically can I achieve?" This aspect reinforces the concept that every staff member has a valuable role to play in achieving overall success for the school. Where each of us carries out our individual responsibilities well we support others throughout the school. In return there is a very strong support network available for us to call on in other areas.
- 3 The third goal is to be related to the school development plan for the year. "As a member of the school team I have a responsibility to support the overall direction of the school. What can I do to support this?"
- 4 The fourth goal is related to some area of personal growth. "As an individual I have a responsibility to do something for myself. What can I do which will help me grow as a person?"

There is a mid year checkpoint to see how progress is being made towards the goals set. Where modifications or assistance is required intervention can be made at this point.

Teachers are asked to evaluate their performance against goals set towards the end of each year. A formal meeting is then held to summarise and record achievements. Where a goal is not achieved this is not seen as a failure. Rather it is seen as an opportunity to refocus for the future. New goals are set and appropriate support and guidance provided. With this model there is no reason why all teachers cannot be successful.

I have deliberately refrained from discussing issues related to teacher competence, as they do not have a place in a whole school performance review programme. It is relatively easy for a principal to identify *poor* teaching. This does not require a formal appraisal or review programme as regular class visits, parent and student contact, the sighting of pupil work and monitoring of pupil learning outcomes will all clearly point out issues of teacher competence. Principals are accountable and are required to identify any barriers to students' learning and put in place appropriate procedures to overcome these barriers. A *poor* teacher is a significant barrier!

Where competency is an issue then a completely different structure should be in place. This would involve close monitoring of a teacher's performance on a regular basis with clearly defined short and longer-term goals specified. The Primary Teachers Collective Contract provisions would apply in these circumstances.

Unfortunately too many current appraisal programmes seek to find fault and focus on issues of competence. There is an assumption that all teachers need to be closely watched in order to do a professional job. We can easily find fault if we look for it. Is any one of us perfect? Time would be far better spent in recognising the strengths our teachers bring to the school. School leaders should provide a strong staff development programme so all can move forward along the competency continuum. Individuals should be encouraged to focus on their identified needs with assistance provided as required to meet goals set.

Structures should be in place which encourage staff to support others, recognising that the overall strength of the school will come about from the collective competence of each individual staff member. In this way schools will develop confident individuals who engage in reflective practice and become *risk-takers*, searching for innovative ways to improve learning outcomes for students.

References:

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