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Facing Your Reflection

Getting a glimpse of yourself from another perspective is your key to identifying and correcting your weaknesses.

By Matthew Alloway

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Why do we use mirrors? Because our outward appearance is an indicator of our status, professionalism, and credibility. Appearance communicates who we are and what we stand for.

Seeing ourselves is so useful, but principals have such a hard time encouraging teachers to reflect on their instructional practices. The following questions are a place to start: To what extent are teachers reflecting on their own practice? How do principals appraise reflective practice? What does it look like to be reflective during the course of teaching a lesson? How frequently do educators adjust practices on the basis of reflection, and what data do they base changes on?

My concerns originated a few years ago. I worked with a student teacher who emulated her vision of what a teacher should look like instead of using the best practices she learned in undergraduate preparation, graduate course work, mentoring, induction, and professional development. It came as no surprise when I found that her mother had retired after 35 years of teaching. Current, research-based pedagogy didn't play a role in the student teacher's instructional delivery: she performed an act resembling her memory of elementary teaching and reflecting the practices of a family mentor. The year was 2005, but she was stuck in the 1960s.

Without reflection, educators cannot shed adopted behaviors that may not reflect the vision of their schools. We must engage the entire school faculty in the simple, deliberate, and ongoing practices of reflecting on daily professional behaviors, making improvements where necessary, and repeating the process as often as needed.

Mirrors

Educators' ability to teach and lead is linked to the way others see and respond to our behaviors. Where we can identify deficiencies, we are able to implement changes. As a classroom teacher, I always looked forward to seeing the ways my eighth graders would impersonate my teaching style. After one particularly gruesome portrayal of myself, I made substantial improvements to the way I redirected off-task students. By encouraging my students to hold a mirror to my work behaviors, I was able to see opportunities for powerful, life-changing alterations.

If you're feeling confident, invite someone to impersonate you. Think about what a student would do to mimic you. How would he or she communicate? What kinds of mannerisms would the student imitate? Would you be offended? Would a top student mirror your instructional delivery in the same way a low-performing student would?

OK, stop. That last question, that's an important one. Do you appear to be the same person whether you're working with the top or bottom performers? Should you? If you haven't already, ask a colleague to mimic you. Now do it again with a close work partner, your boss, a highly involved parent, and your spouse. See where this activity takes you? It's a glimpse in the mirror that shows you the personal and professional practices you must modify.

Hanging the Mirrors

Encouraging reflection is as easy as looking in the mirror. When we see ourselves, we modify what we see to improve it. Professional development opportunities should enable educators to do the same by using the following practices.

Stop and think. Look back at what you've been doing and make improvements on the basis of your perception of effective instruction. This is the most traditional mirror for improvement, and you should make it a part of your regular practice.

Imagine. Consider the views of your critics. Their opinions are valuable bits of feedback from people who aren't trying to protect your feelings the way coworkers or friends may.

Walk the talk. If you're confident, ask that someone impersonate you. This approach can provide you with data for improving your work.

Extreme makeover. Put actual mirrors in your classroom or office and check yourself while you work. Do you really look like an effective

teacher or administrator?

Your reflection should trigger questions that are essential to personal and professional growth: How does the way you see yourself influence your decisions? How does self-awareness influence your productivity? What can you learn by watching impersonations of yourself—are you bossy? Disorganized? Caring?

Reflection is where improvement begins. Without multiple methods for looking at ourselves, our ability to change depends on external motivation.

Summary

By providing structures, professional development, and strategies for reflection, administrators can proactively

make continuous improvements to the work that is conducted in schools. Reflection helps educators modify and adjust their personal styles of delivery and communication and can be used to evaluate organization, poise, and character. By asking students to be a part of this process, educators send the message that they respect students' role in our school community and value their opinions.

Before you distance yourself from this practice or roll it out to your staff, call a teacher to your office. Give him or her an immunity pass, then ask the teacher to impersonate you. If you don't like what you see reflected, take a closer look at yourself and make some adjustments. **PL**