

Harnessing Your Observation Skills to Inspire Leadership

BY NATALIA AMBROZEK

As part of an assessment team, I constantly use my observation skills. Daily, I observe teacher effectiveness and produce feedback reports to help improve practices. Program leaders widely use the observation and feedback process to improve classroom quality and for a good reason. By focusing deliberately on what teachers are doing, you notice their strengths and capitalize on growth opportunities. As a result, teachers know where they have room to grow and can implement the necessary changes to improve. In time and with subsequent observations, the effectiveness of those changes is evaluated. Then, the cycle begins again.

The process feels very familiar within the context of a classroom and teacher performance. But can these same principles of observation be used with staff outside the classroom? Can observation and feedback be a tool for inspiring connections among staff and cultivating leadership opportunities? With the proper steps, it can! Let's explore how center leaders can easily apply these observation strategies to inspire staff leadership.

OBSERVE AND RECOGNIZE STAFF EXPERTISE

Teachers all come with tremendous knowledge and skills. However, just as parents are the experts on their children's unique strengths because of the depth of that relationship, you can become the expert on your individual staff members' strengths by observing them within and beyond the classroom. Make a list of what each staff member does well and their areas of expertise. Treat the list as a living document and update it regularly. These areas of expertise can be broad (maybe you have a teacher who is very good at having challenging conversations with families) or highly specific (one staff member made an engaging lesson based on a popular book). No strength is too small. All your staff members are experts on something – create a running list for each.

BE THE CONNECTION MAKER

Once you know your staff's strengths, connect them with other staff who could benefit from that knowledge. Listen attentively for pain points and areas of struggle that your staff members share with you during conversations or reflective supervision sessions. Highlight that there is another staff member whose knowledge matches their needs and offer to connect them. In this step, avoiding the urge to provide the answer yourself is essential. You may have a solution ready – as a leader in the field, that's a skill you've developed. But the goal here is to cultivate those same skills in your staff, so taking a back seat in the problem-solving process will allow the experts in your organization to shine.

One crucial consideration to keep in mind is the trust of your staff. Before connecting your staff members, quickly mention the situation to each. “Another teacher wants to go deeper into [insert topic here] to improve their understanding. I remember you said you’re confident in that skill. Would you feel comfortable talking to them?” You’ve let your teacher know there is someone at the center who could benefit from their specific expertise. You also allow your staff members to indicate their readiness for this leadership opportunity. (And if they’re hesitant the first time and don’t want to collaborate, that’s ok. Keep asking them whenever new situations arise. The more your staff sees that you recognize their leadership, the more they will realize it themselves.)

RECOGNIZE STAFF EXPERTISE – EVERY TIME

Ensure your teachers know you see what they’re good at individually and in group settings. That teacher who navigates tough conversations with families? Remind her how easy she makes it seem after every difficult conversation. Or that teacher with the excellent literature-based lesson plan? Mention him and the compelling activity to your staff during your next professional development day and any time the book title comes up in conversations with teachers. During your reflective supervision meetings, thank them individually for connecting and collaborating. By regularly providing that feedback to your staff members, you’re reinforcing their areas of expertise. Just as feedback is essential after observations in improving teacher performance in the classroom, it’s also necessary when observing for and creating leadership opportunities. You’ll never know what kinds of ideas you’ll spark and the growth opportunities you’ll reinforce.

In time, you may find your staff members volunteering to share their expertise with others. Because of your consistent observation and feedback, they will recognize their strengths and the value they provide to your organization. Your one-on-one meetings may include teachers reflecting on what they’re good at and offering to help their colleagues.

You can leverage your staff’s strengths into impactful leadership.

By implementing the strategies outlined – observing and recognizing staff expertise, making meaningful connections, and consistently acknowledging their strengths – you can utilize the familiar observation and feedback process to cultivate an environment where leadership is nurtured and celebrated. Remember, each staff member brings unique skills and insights to your program. With your keen eye, support, and encouragement, you help them grow as leaders to benefit your programs and those you serve.

RESOURCES

If strengths-based leadership is new to you, below are some resources to encourage you to reflect upon the practice.

Activate HCG. (n.d.). *Maximizing team performance through strengths-based management*.
<https://www.activatehcg.com/blog/maximizing-team-performance-through-strengths-based-management>

Gallup. (2023, April 12). *Strengths-based leadership: How to be an effective leader.*

<https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/405644/strengths-based-leadership-how-to-be-effective-leader.aspx>

Gallup. (2023, October 10). *Why build a strengths-based culture?*

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/470621/why-build-strengths-based-culture.aspx>

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