

About the author: *Mark Shellinger created the SAM process, a professional development approach using a unique set of tools to change a principal's focus from school management tasks to instructional leadership—activities directly connected to improving teaching and learning. Over 600 schools in seventeen states contract with the National SAM Innovation Project (NSIP) for services. Independent and external research has determined that principals gain the equivalent of 27 extra days of instructional leadership time in their first year using the SAM process. (PSA, 2011) By the third year the gain of instructional leadership time exceeds 55 days. The process is designed to help the principal be reflective about how to best work with teachers to improve teaching and learning. Mr. Shellinger describes below a facilitative communications protocol NSIP coaches model for principals to use with teachers.*

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Ask, Don't Tell

Can you remember the last time someone helped you improve a skill or practice? What did this person do? Ask? Say? Did they leave you a checklist delineating your failures? Did they observe a lesson and then tell you later what you should have done?

There is scant, if any, real evidence that telling people what to do improves their teaching. Yet this is what formal, summative evaluation and walkthrough checklists generally do.

Interaction between a principal and teacher is rarely frequent or collaborative. It is often not taken as supportive. School leaders are charged with increasing the capacity and effectiveness of teachers, but are not encouraged or trained to use the most effective strategies.

In the SAM process we help principals change their approach with teachers by examining how principals use their time and then reconnecting them with the effective communication and teaching approaches they likely used when they were teachers. The key elements of this coaching approach are:

1. ask, don't tell
2. validation
3. feedback
4. celebration

Telling vs. Asking

Telling is quick and easy. A principal notices a teacher has not written the learning objective on the board. A note is left, or sent electronically, telling the teacher to correct this for the next lesson. The principal leaves the room thinking this was helpful. Was it?

The likely result:

1. Compliance: The teacher writes the objective on the board but does not use this to improve lesson effectiveness.
2. Passive Resistance: The teacher ignores the direction. “I was here before the principal was hired and I’ll still be here when he is gone.”

Asking takes time and only becomes easy with practice. In the same scenario, concerning the missing objective on the board, the principal *asks* the teacher instead of tells:

“How do kids in your class know what you expect them to know by the end of the lesson?”

This asks the teacher to reflect. It does not assume one correct strategy or approach. It assumes good intent. It assumes that the principal views the teacher as a professional partner.

Let’s say the teacher, used to a compliance culture, thinks this approach is a ruse, and responds:

“Oh, I am so sorry. I forgot to write the objective on the board. I will be more careful.”

The principal could accept this answer and move on. But for what purpose? Has the principal succeeded in building capacity? Here’s an alternative approach:

Principal: “Does writing the objective on the board work for all of your students? What else have you tried?”

Teacher: “I talk to them about what I want them to know. It seems to work for most.”

Principal: “What else have you thought about trying?”

Teacher: “I don’t know. What do you think I should try?”

Principal: “I think you know more than I do about your students. What have you considered? What might you do later in the lesson to better make this connection?”

Teacher: “I could try a pair-share. I could have the kids ask each other what they still don’t understand about the objective. I might try an exit slip at the end of the lesson, too. This could guide me in planning the next lesson.”

Principal: “Cool. I am looking forward to seeing how your ideas works.”

Let’s say the teacher drew a blank and said he/she did not know what else to try to help a student connect the objective with the learning activities. Should the principal just tell?

We would suggest a different set of questions instead. Examples:

- a. What has worked for you in the past?
- b. If you don’t know, how might you find out?
- c. Who else might you ask for ideas?
- d. Do you know another teacher you might ask?
- e. Is there data that would help?

In this “ask” approach, the principal is building capacity and, importantly, a culture of trust with a colleague that suggests “we are in this together”. The principal avoided the trap of “telling” the teacher what to do, even when asked directly.

Think about the end result of telling, even if you try to disguise it as a suggestion. If it works, it is to the credit of the principal, not the teacher. If it does not work, it is the principal’s fault. This approach has the added benefit of removing the principal from having to pretend to have all the answers. This is a self-imposed handicap burdening many principals. It is liberating and relationship building to ask instead of tell. It is even better when the leader can say: “I don’t know. How will we find out together?”

Validation

Let’s say a teacher emotionally demands that a particular student should be removed from a classroom due to rudeness and defiance. “I’ve had it with that kid. Do your job and get him out!” The principal’s response will either build or damage the relationship necessary to build the teacher’s capacity.

Hearing is not the same as understanding. We teach principals to listen for the emotion, assume a good intent and help the teacher, first, by validating.

“Wow. This is really hard for you. I am sorry. I know how much you care about all of your students. Tell me about it.”

Validation goes to the heart of the matter: how the person feels. The principal has to connect here, first, if there is any hope of helping the teacher.

I became a principal when I was 29 years old. My mentor, Joe Widman, gave me great advice: “When teachers come to your office and vent they are rarely looking for your opinion or direction. They want you to hear them. To understand what they are dealing with, personally or professionally. To feel.” I would have been a better principal if I had fully understood and followed his advice.

We teach principals and office staff a communications protocol that starts with validation. It is easy to explain, but hard to do. Like “ask, don’t tell, it requires a lot of practice. The good news is that validation can become natural and instinctive with a little practice.

It is human nature to take another’s comment personally. The principal, in the earlier scenario, where a teacher demanded a student be removed from a class, could easily have taken offense. But to what end? What is the “up side” of reacting in-kind? Fighting the urge to assume the issue is “all about me” is critical. “All about me” is a trap best avoided.

We teach principals to pivot, turn away from the confrontational trap. Feel the teacher’s pain rather than react to the words. Then, ask questions that show concern and a way forward:

- a. “I know you care about Jose and it is frustrating that he is rude.” This statement shows support and allows the teacher to share feelings.
- b. “What does he say about his behavior when you talk with him privately?” This technique, assumes the teacher has done something good, shows faith in the teacher without directing. If the teacher has not done this yet, it gives the teacher an easy and face saving next step.
- c. “Who might you enlist to help gain Jose’s cooperation?” This is open ended and demonstrates the principal believes in the teacher’s capacity to solve the problem.
- d. “What have you tried already to connect with Jose?”
- e. “Has anything you’ve tried had even the smallest degree of success?”
- f. “What else do you think you could do to better connect with Jose?”
- g. “What do you think I could do to help you succeed with Jose?” This deflects the demand and reframes it in a professional manner.

- h. I would like to come in and sit with Jose tomorrow. Do you think this might help?" This is a last resort. It would be much better if the teacher came up with this or any other suggestion as your goal is to build the teacher's capacity, not your own.

Feedback

In the SAM process, we divide feedback into three areas: directive, non-directive and celebratory. To qualify as a feedback it has to be a two-way or group conversation. Why not accept written comments or checklists as feedback? Because there is not a way to determine if the message was understood, received and added value. Nothing can replace human interaction if change, or learning, is to take place.

Consider a fourth grader who misuses the words: there, their and they're. Would you consider it good teaching to avoid talking with the student? After all, it is far easier to just circle the words in red on the child's paper. If good teaching means learning, it requires interaction that is two-way or within a group.

Because teachers are adults does not mean that they learn differently. If anything, they need more non-directive, two-way and group communication, or interaction, to develop a new skill than the fourth grader in the prior example. And, frankly, a lot more praise for positive movement.

We define non-directive feedback as engaging the teacher in conversation about practice that causes reflection. The scenario I shared in "ask, don't tell", qualifies as non-directive feedback. It builds capacity, trust and professional relationships. It takes time, energy, quality thought and preparation on the principal's part. It is not easy but it is highly effective as long as the principal is adept at using the other two kinds of feedback: directive and celebratory.

Directive Feedback

We define directive feedback as two way communication between a principal and teacher or group, that contains an order or suggestion. The example of telling a teacher to put the learning objective on board qualifies as directive feedback.

So would:

"I suggest you consider re-grouping your students each week."

"I'd like to see the lesson differentiated, not just the assignment."

"Please turn in your lesson plan by 5:00 PM."

Directive feedback is necessary in most school settings. It is simply a matter of degree and timing. There are a number of instructional practices that a principal must be willing, in the end, to insist upon.

In the example given earlier of a teacher demanding that a student be removed from the classroom, a principal might start by validating and then move to reflective, non-directive questions, and still face stiff resistance. At this point, the principal must be willing to be directive.

Teacher: “I don’t care a whit for Jose and am not going to try to teach him, ever.”

Principal: “I want you to think about this further. You have a responsibility to teach each student. Make an appointment with the school counselor this afternoon and prepare an intervention plan. I will meet with you both in the morning to review.”

Directive and non-directive feedback: It is not either or. It is both.

Celebration

Social psychologists have long known the remarkable power of positive feedback. We know adults crave this and its absence is the leading reason people quit their jobs, lose their idealism and say goodbye to passion for their profession.

In our work, we define Celebratory Feedback as two-way or group conversation that is full of praise with a high level of specificity. We look at celebratory feedback as a mechanism to cement the positive progress a principal identifies in a teacher’s practice.

Let’s use the example of the teacher who did not put the learning objective on the board and, through non-directive conversation with her principal, came up with a new technique to try. Here’s how celebratory feedback conversation might play out:

Principal: “Wow. I have to tell you I was impressed. When I was in your room this morning and saw you try the pair-share, where you had the kids talk with each other and identify what they still were unsure of...it was great!”

Teacher: “Thanks. It could have been better. I should have tried the exit slips, too.”

Principal: “I think what you did was great. The way the group in back paid attention was impressive. What did you like best about it?”

Teacher: “It really made me feel good that they knew so much and we were only half way through the lesson. It made the rest of the lesson easier to teach. I felt less pressured.”

Principal: “I really am impressed. Those kids don’t know how lucky they are.”

This conversation cements the improvement. It works because it is genuine, specific and engaged the teacher. The principal avoided the teacher’s invitation to focus on the negative, or even a next step, what she could have done with the exit slip idea. Instead, the principal remained focused on what was important: praising the teacher and celebrating the success.

One principal who was new to the SAM process told me after she learned about celebratory feedback she went home and wrote a personal note to each of her teachers praising a specific improvement she had noticed in their practice. She placed the notes in mailboxes with a high degree of personal satisfaction and anticipation. By lunch, she had not heard back from anyone. Then she remembered: Celebratory feedback is most effective when it is two-way. She went to see a teacher who was on break and asked for a few minutes. The conversation the ensued was heartwarming and transformational. The teacher said she thought the note was just the result of some workshop and did not know the principal really meant what she had written until she began talking with her: asking her questions, praising and encouraging.

A Final Story

An urban high school principal in a highly unionized and combative environment began the SAM process four years ago. He agonized about the fact that his baseline time use data, collected over a week by a “shadow” who coded his actions every five minutes, showed that he gave only directive feedback.

He reflected on the fact that one of his teachers was belligerent and passive aggressive in refusing his directives. He decided to try a new approach: ask, don’t tell.

He entered her classroom, and said:

Principal: “Eleanor, I wondered if you could tell me how kids know what it is you want them to learn from a lesson.”

Eleanor: “You know, Ed, this may be the first time you’ve ever asked me a question. So I will tell you. I start every lesson with the kids writing the objective in their learning logs. I say it. They write it. I call on a few to read what they wrote, so I can see if they got it right, and we discuss it. Then, half-way through the lesson, I ask them to respond to this question in their learning logs: “What about this am I still unsure of?” I have a few volunteers share what they wrote and I adjust what I had planned for the remainder of our time. At the end, they write again in their learning logs. I collect, read them at home and plan my lesson for the next day. Now do you see why I won’t put the objective on the board?”

Principal: “Wow. I am glad I asked you. I would love to see every teacher do what you do.”

Teacher: “Keep asking, Ed. Maybe they are.”

The principal in question believes this was the tipping point in improving his relationship with his staff and becoming a true instructional leader. He now spends over 50% of his day observing teaching and conversing about it with teachers, students and parents.

Maybe he is right.

The SAM process uses a variety of communication tools and resources to assist principals, SAMs and Time Change Coaches. Key sources include:

1. How to Win Friends and Influence People, Dale Carnegie
2. Active Listening
3. Fierce Conversations, Susan Scott
4. Five Minute Feedback™, Mike Rutherford, Rutherford Learning Group
5. Time/Task Analysis™, Mark Shellinger and Carol Merritt
6. SAM Conversation Protocol™, Mark Shellinger and Carol Merritt
7. SAM Coaching Guide™, Carol Lensing and Janet Young
8. TimeTrack™, Mark Shellinger
9. Leading Change, Jody Spiro
10. Rethinking Teacher Evaluation and Supervision, Kim Marshall

