

[Sometimes we just need to be quiet and listen]

By: Robert Crowe

We all know that teachers are the linchpins to student achievement. Yet we seem to struggle on how to best support them. Most support for teachers involves offering training where they are told what to do. So, if you think that telling teachers what to do works best, stop reading. If, however, you think that asking teachers what to do—and then listening—works best, keep reading.

Because, the real issue is that not enough of us stop and take the time to actually listen to teachers.

Listening is an active process. We ask questions. And then listen. We clarify. And then listen. We restate. And then listen. We share. And then listen.

When we listen, amazing things can occur.

We discover things.

Last spring, we were asked by a district to solve a dilemma for upper elementary. According to district officials, these teachers had received training on standards, on new standards-aligned programs, and on new assessments. Yet student scores remained stagnant. The district asked us to find out why the teachers didn't do what they were told.

We met with the teachers and began a conversation. We listened. What we heard was instructive. The teachers were not actively trying to defy the district, they were trying to implement a variety of initiatives without having clear expectations.

We helped the district discover that it wasn't what they said that was most important but what the teachers heard that was most important. This discovery helped the district articulate their vision more clearly. In fact, they began asking for feedback during all staff development to deepen their understanding of what teachers were hearing.

We build trust.

A year ago, we were contracted as the interim CEO at an urban charter school. As the new administration we knew we needed to include the teachers in the conversation about what was working and what wasn't. The atmosphere on the first day of professional

development was open and energizing.

However, when we returned for small group support the teachers seemed less open and less energized. There was a chorus of ‘We can’t’ offered at every turn. “We can’t integrate reading and writing because of our schedule.” “We can’t offer balanced lesson plans because of the textbooks.” “We can’t alter Friday testing because parents expect it.” It seemed that these teachers were not as eager to change as we had thought.

But when they talked—and we listened—something else was heard. The teachers had never been asked for their ideas before. The teachers had never been listened to before. They didn’t trust this new approach and didn’t know how to respond to the questions. But the more they were listened to, the more they began to share their ideas, and the more they began to trust the new administration. And with this trust, change happened.

We make better decisions.

This summer, a small suburban district gathered a group of teachers to discuss next steps regarding the implementation of Common Core. The teachers stated that they needed training on instructional strategies that would guarantee student mastery. They had been told—and they believed—that they didn’t have sufficient instructional know-how to help their students.

Well, through asking, clarifying, restating, and sharing, it was clear that this group of teachers did not need more instruction—they already had a wealth of strategies that helped students. What they didn’t have was a deep understanding of the patterns within the standards that would help them plan stronger units and lessons. In fact, without this understanding, they recognized that their instructional strategies would have no guarantee of working.

So, by listening, the district made a better decision regarding the use of their professional development. Instead of training on another slew of instructional strategies, the district decided to support the teachers with more clarity around the curriculum—supporting teachers to build a standards-based scope and sequence, integrated units culminating in an authentic product, and balanced lesson plans. This decision helped the teachers better implement the standards because they realized that many of their instructional strategies worked well—once the standards were deeply understood. However, this decision could not have been made without listening to the teachers first.

Amazing things can occur.

Listen to teachers. Hear what they have to say. You’ll be amazed at what you will hear.