

Leslie's Lament: How Can I Make Teacher Supervision Meaningful?

by Perry R. Rettig

On the outskirts of the busy city of Britton sat Washington Elementary School. Built in 1961, Washington had been through many changes in student demographics, programs offered for its changing student population, and curricular adaptations to meet changing philosophies of pedagogy and student expectations. On a sunny September Friday afternoon, Principal Leslie O'Connor looked out her office window and tried to make sense of this eclectic menagerie of students, curriculum, and activities.

"Do we know what we are doing here?" Leslie questioned herself. "How can I provide leadership to these teachers when we don't seem to have any true understanding of our purpose, and much less any idea of how to get there?"

Leslie decided to call her older sister, a marketing executive, just to talk. Joanne was always there to lend an ear when Leslie became frustrated. The phone calls were becoming more numerous these past two years.

Leslie began, "Hi, Joanne. It's me, again. Any big contracts today?"

"Same old same ol'," Joanne responded. "What's up, now? No, let me guess. A parent is complaining that too much time is spent on using calculators and not enough on the basics. No, no. Teachers are in the lounge complaining that the new state standardized tests don't measure the higher-level thinking that must be taught. No, I know. The superintendent has initiated a new model of principal evaluations based on student outcomes. That's it, right?"

After a long pause, Leslie sullenly answered, "I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing here. I want to feel like we're doing something significant here, but it just seems like we're going through the motions. I just don't know."

Joanne had learned over the years to not give much advice. It was better to just listen and let Leslie think out loud and come to her own con-

clusions. So her response was a simple "You and me both."

"What do you mean, 'You and me both'? I went into education fourteen years ago so that I could do something important for people, not to make money!"

Joanne had to break her vow of silence. "Listen, Ms. Martyr! You make decent money, and educators are not an exclusive club of people who help others. Lord help me; I might get to heaven someday, too!"

"I didn't mean that. . . ."

"Listen, teachers always think that they are underpaid and unappreciated. They think they are the only ones who work to help others. They think that nobody understands them. They think . . ."

"Okay, Joanne. You've made your point."

"No, I haven't, Leslie," Joanne retorted. Trying to calm herself, she hesitated. "I think teachers, by and large, probably are underappreciated. Still, their pay and benefits are arguably reasonable. On the other hand, they did go into education to help others, to work with children. They should not be penalized for that, but the point I want to make is that they are not the only ones who work for others. All of society benefits from the work of all of us. We each play an important role, and few of us get paid what we feel is fair."

Leslie had recovered from her sister's diatribe and decided to get to the real issue. "I'm concerned that I don't know what is going on in my own building. I go from one mini-crisis to another, from one meeting to another, from one in-service to another, from one observation to

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another, and I'm not sure that anything I do makes a difference.

"There are two educational theorists, Bolman and Deal, who believe that schools are loosely coupled systems. They feel that all the things we do go on in isolation with little connection, and yet we put on airs of rational, organized structure and cohesion."

"All the things we do go on in isolation with little connection, and yet we put on airs of rational, organized structure and cohesion."

"All jobs are like that, Leslie," came Joanne's reply. "I have held several different jobs over the years and work with many different companies today. They are all these loosely coupled systems. They make poor decisions, decisions are often made on emotion, huge amounts of money are spent at times without a great deal of thought, and there is little participatory management, as they would have you believe. None of our systems are as cohesive and rational as we might like to think, or as we portray to our larger publics."

"Really, you mean you have workers who gossip and complain? You have bosses who make decisions that are not based upon the data you

provide them? You mean they waste money? You mean one department doesn't know what the other is doing?" questioned Leslie, hoping that she was not alone.

"Well, yes and no," came Joanne's response. "Nothing is always that way. We are always trying to make rational decisions and watch our budgets. That is extremely important to us. But we don't always make the best decisions. We adopt new ideas in the hope that they will work. People do complain and waste time, but they also work hard and care about their jobs. I guess this is what it's about when people work together in any organization."

"Okay! So all organizations are far from perfect. What can I as a leader do to get hold of this imperfect system? How can I get it under control?"

Joanne exclaimed, "That's the problem. You can't get hold of it. You can't control it. These human work systems are like—like an ecological system, I guess. In an ecological system, nothing controls anything. Still, because everything is interconnected, they do impact each other. Don't try to control, let the system work naturally."

"Then why have a principal? Why have a leader? Ecological systems don't have administrators!" exclaimed Leslie in exasperation.

"You're right, of course," Joanne said. "Perhaps we must redefine leadership. But listen, I have to go to meet with a client. Let's have lunch at your place on Saturday. I'll bring Chinese. In the meantime, let's both reflect on this ecological system stuff. Is that a good metaphor? How can leadership be redefined?"

"All right, but I had hoped for a better answer from you when I called," Leslie muttered. She looked at her calendar. She had to be in Mary Thompson's second-grade classroom for an observation in ten minutes.

Mary Thompson, a veteran teacher of twenty-eight years, had won the district "teacher of the year" award twice in the past ten years. She had written much of the innovative curriculum that second-grade teachers throughout the district use. She was also on the board of the state elementary-school science teachers association. Mary Thompson was a master teacher, and the parents knew it. Numerous parent requests for her classroom each year made it quite difficult for Leslie to schedule heterogeneous classes each year.

Leslie sat at Mary's desk while observing her introduce the science lesson to her young

charges. Leslie glanced at her notes to remind herself of their pre-conference. With all Mary's experience and expertise, she still got nervous when being observed by the principal. Undoubtedly, that was why Mary asked Leslie to observe her science lesson—part of her comfort zone. Leslie knew it would be a successful lesson, but would she be able to help Mary grow professionally?

"Why am I here?" Leslie questioned herself. "I'm probably a thorn in Mary's side, and I don't know what good advice I would possibly be able to give to her—something that she has never heard before. Who am I to give Mary advice?"

The lesson blurred in front of Leslie as she sat writing all the components of a good lesson. Mary was clearly a pro. Leslie found herself drifting to the conversation she just had with Joanne.

"I wonder how Joanne is evaluated?" Leslie daydreamed. "Does she get observed? How does she evaluate her employees? Does she observe them?" In her pocket calendar, Leslie wrote these questions to ask Joanne when she saw her on Saturday.

Mary continued with her lesson. She finished on time, the kids enjoyed it, and it was clear that they learned a little something along the way.

Leslie went back to her office to analyze her notes and to try to come up with something profound to tell Mary. But she immediately found a message waiting from the superintendent. One activity and small crisis after another filled her day until she noticed it was already 5:00—time to go home. Leslie resigned herself to finishing Mary's observation report the coming weekend.

It was a windy and cloudy late Saturday morning with a threat of rain when Joanne arrived at Leslie's house. "We might as well be indoors on a day like today," Joanne said.

"That's for sure!" Leslie exclaimed. "Are you ready to get down to business, or . . . ?"

"No, I've got this thing fresh on my mind, and I want to get it straightened out. We can talk over lunch. Is that your usual General Tso's chicken and rice? I'm having pork lo mein. It's all set in the kitchen."

Walking into the kitchen, Joanne said, "Leslie, I pulled together our employee-evaluation forms and had one of my clients fax over his employee-evaluation form. I asked the travel agency executive who leases the building with us for their employee-evaluation form; they didn't have one. She said that they would like to create one, and that she would like to hear what we are doing."

Leslie replied. "I guess I never thought about how the private sector supervises or evaluates their employees. I guess . . ."

"What do you mean by 'supervise' and 'evaluate'?" interrupted Joanne.

"Hmmm. I have to think on that one. I guess often we just intertwine those words. I guess technically we supervise teachers when we observe them, and evaluation is more of a summative thing at the end of the year. I know that teachers say when the principal comes in to observe them, 'The principal is going to evaluate me today.' But, I don't know if that is really evaluation. I don't know. I guess I remember in my graduate class they talked about formative and summative evaluations. Summative evaluations are the traditional end-of-the-year evaluations, while anything we do with the teacher in terms of observations and other work would be considered formative evaluations."

"Why am I here?" Leslie questioned herself.

"I'm probably a thorn in Mary's side, and I don't know what good advice I would possibly be able to give to her. . . ."

Joanne listened thoughtfully and then responded, "You know, in most businesses, I don't think there really are what you call formative evaluations—at least not in the sense of observations. I don't go into my employees' office and watch them talk to clients, at least not with the intent of evaluating them. But we do interact often during the course of the work week, and we are continually giving constant feedback to one another. Maybe that's formative evaluation. But you see, we work so closely together on projects. It's just natural to give feedback. I guess that is not typical in schools."

"True. Maybe this is more difficult to compare than what I thought." Leslie interrupted herself. "On the other hand, our school has two sets of teachers that team teach. And certainly other teachers work closely together on a daily and weekly basis. For example, all the grade-level teachers plan together and they all work so closely with the special-ed staff. And my art teacher very often plans her units around what the regular-ed teachers are doing in their classrooms."

These staff do work closely together—certainly more closely than I do with them.”

“I always have trouble eating the last bit of rice out of the box with chopsticks; can you give me a fork?” After finishing her rice and pouring another cup of tea for her sister and herself, Joanne continued. “Forgive me for this suggestion, Leslie, but perhaps the wrong person is doing the evaluating. Well, not all of it. You would undoubtedly be in the best position to do the summative evaluation, but perhaps—now just hear me out—perhaps the teachers would be the best to provide formative supervision. After all, they work with each other the closest and know best how each other is doing. They are the ones who can provide really substantive feedback. Maybe we should look at it like this—what is the purpose of the formative evaluation, or of supervision?”

“You sure know how to get to the heart of the matter, don’t you? I know that most teachers feel it’s to fill a bureaucratic function, or for accountability at best. But the intent is to determine if there are any weaknesses and to address those; and the intent is to help them become better teachers . . . I guess.”

Joanne put her hand on her chin and closed her eyes, looking as if she were deep in reflection, or nodding off from lunch and a less-than-absorbing conversation. With her eyes still closed, Joanne quietly said, “Let’s go back to the private sector for a moment. A couple of minutes ago, I mentioned that we are continually giving each other feedback. You know, asking why something was done this way, why not another way, where do we go from here, how will we know if this is working, when and how will we decide, etc. Ninety percent of these conversations are just that—conversations. Things are not always written down, at least not that goes into someone’s personnel file. We constantly give each other feedback, and I think we do a better job because of it.”

Joanne continued, “Our marketing corporation has an annual evaluation form—a summative form, if you will. As the supervisor, and I only supervise three assistants, I sit down at the end of each year and basically just write a narrative about my thoughts on how each person has done. I look at their past annual evaluations and look at how they were evaluated—you know, in terms of what they were doing, areas for improvement, and goals for the upcoming year. Oh, before

I do this, they prepare and give to me a self-evaluation, which is a big help for me. They also provide a customer portfolio for me. This shows the work they have completed since the last evaluation period, as well as work in progress.”

“Okay, now I get to ask the question back to you!” Leslie quipped. “What is the purpose of this summative evaluation?”

“You learned well, grasshopper,” Joanne mocked with a smile. “To be honest, I guess it serves a few purposes. First, if a person has not been meeting their goals and has been doing unsatisfactorily, this provides documentation toward improvement or possible dismissal. If that is the case, there will have been other documentation building—a ‘paper trail,’ if you will. Second, it provides direction for future growth and goals. Third, it allows me to determine merit and whether a bonus, or how large a bonus, is merited.”

“Yeah, bonuses! Educators never get bonuses—not even a Thanksgiving turkey!” Leslie said.

“You didn’t go into teaching for the money. You went into it for the intrinsic rewards, right?”

Leslie turned red and glared at her mischievous sister.

“Just kidding, just kidding. You know, I looked at my last client’s personnel-evaluation system. They are a much larger corporation and they employ 2,000-plus workers in the area. You know who I’m talking about. Anyway, they use a form for their summative evaluation. It basically serves the purpose my narrative does.”

Leslie questioned, “Is that a policy? Or, is it part of their collective bargaining agreement? Did the union agree to it?”

“Well, this is not a policy. This is standard operating procedure, I guess, for their professional staff—they are not unionized for their professional staff. Their line workers are unionized, but I don’t know how they are evaluated. Anyway, I thought you were interested in evaluating and supervising professional staff.”

“Well, yeah, but . . . just go on,” Leslie hesitated.

Joanne continued, “This end-of-the-year form has a section for goals for the current reporting period. This is filled out one year prior to the summative conference and is signed by both supervisor and supervisee. This goal section only allows for three goals, and then leaves space for objectives, activities, resources, and a time line to meet these goals.”

“That sounds just like what our principals have to do every year. I guess that’s who we con-

sider our professional staff—at least in practice, even though that might be unintentional, but it is what we show in practice.”

“That’s an interesting point, Leslie.” Joanne stopped for a moment and sipped her tea. “This form also has an appendix where the employee writes a personal narrative and can attach any supporting documentation. The next section looks like the first, but it is dated for the next year. There is no place for checking whether the person is recommended for rehire or release, or what competency level they are judged to have reached.”

“Once again, that sounds fairly close to what our principal evaluations are like, but nowhere near what we do for our teaching staff,” Leslie said.

“Let me also point out that this large corporation also does periodic evaluations throughout the year. Each new professional staff member gets a ninety-day review after they are first hired. It is more narrative in nature. Then they have another three-month review, and from then on every six months.”

“I wonder what their employees feel about these evaluations?” Leslie asked. “I mean, do they think it is a pain and does not provide them with anything of substance?”

Joanne considered this question for a moment. “I know some of the staff there. It really depends on who their supervisor is. Some people get really good constructive, growth-oriented feedback—feedback that comes through a true dialogue. Others have supervisors who nitpick and find every little fault. Others have supervisors who write down only positive things and give no constructive feedback.”

“That sure sounds like many of my colleagues,” Leslie said. “Some are so negative and think they have to be ‘big brother.’ Others are afraid to give any ‘criticism’ or don’t know what to say, so they just write all glowing comments—maybe for motivation. Perhaps some are more deliberate; I just don’t know.”

“Well, now what?” Joanne mused.

Leslie got up to clear off the table and wash the dishes. “It seems to me that I have to treat my faculty more like professionals. More interaction and feedback among them. Maybe my role will be changing. Maybe I need to provide opportunities for them to get together, to reflect, and to provide for their own professional growth as colleagues.”

“Go, girl!”

“Maybe I will have to create their schedules so they will have routine time to get together and plan and reflect. But I guess the first step is for us to start talking. We need to get together as professional colleagues and decide how we can together make this system more growth-oriented. That’s the first step, wouldn’t you think?”

Joanne answered, “That sounds like a good idea.”

“That’s the plan, Joanne!” Leslie exclaimed. “I feel good, so good. Just like I knew that I would!” Leslie sang as she did her best James Brown impersonation. “Oh, I digress. Anyway, this has got me thinking about so many other things. Next month we can get together and talk about staff development. How about Tex-Mex?”

“It seems to me that I have to treat my faculty more like professionals. More interaction and feedback among them. Maybe my role will be changing. . . .”

Leslie returned to school on Monday. She had decided to complete Mary Thompson’s observation report as she usually did. She would hold her postconference after school that day. Leslie wrote a memo to the staff briefly reporting on her frustration with the current method of teacher supervision and evaluation. She further wrote about her conversation with Joanne, and that she would like to have a faculty meeting on Wednesday after school to discuss this issue, and only this issue. She asked the teachers to bring ideas. “We’re getting off the dime,” Leslie thought to herself.

In order to maintain the meaningful spirit of her Saturday dialogue with Joanne, Leslie bought two dozen egg rolls and tea for the teachers. She was excited, yet a little nervous. After the staff assembled, Leslie quickly reviewed the contents of the memo. She opened up the meeting for input.

Silence.

More silence.

“This was supposed to be inspirational,” Leslie thought in frustration. “Does anybody like our present system of observations and evaluations?”

The silence was broken only by the clacking of teacups. Finally, uncomfortable with the silence, Tom Brentley spoke up. “I don’t want to evaluate my friends. That is your job.” Several

heads nodded in agreement, and several other heads munched on egg rolls.

"Okay. This is good. . . ." Leslie stuttered in disbelief.

After another pregnant pause, Leslie continued. "Are your summative evaluations meaningful to you?"

"What is a summative evaluation?" asked Samantha, a rookie teacher.

"Oh, that's the annual end-of-the-year evaluation I write for each teacher. Have they been meaningful to anybody?" Several heads timidly looked down at their tables. Tom got up and poured himself some more tea, and motioned as if to ask if anyone else wanted any.

"Let me try another direction," Leslie stammered. "Does anyone find my observations worthwhile?" More reaction this time. Several younger teachers politely nodded, while numerous other teachers smiled in amusement.

Finally, Mary Thompson spoke up. "I think the input you can give to newer teachers is necessary and appropriate. They need to know if they are doing a good job and to be given direction for improvement. But if I may speak for some of my veteran colleagues, the observations become less and less meaningful to us. They are more . . . more . . ."

"An interruption in our busy days!" Gavin Jenkins interrupted.

This was catching Leslie off-guard, but then she remembered that she too was frustrated and wanted to make a change. "You are all sharing the same frustrations I have. I do believe that I can provide some feedback to everyone, but I don't think it is adequate or sufficient."

"I can see your point," piped up Sarah Lesofsky, the music teacher. "But how can we make some changes? Like Tom said, I don't want to evaluate my peers."

not you are doing acceptable work in order to keep working here. In other words, you are meeting performance standards, or not. Does that make sense to you?"

Although there was silence, most heads nodded in agreement. The silence was broken by the staff clown, Frank Teal, who asked, "Are you going to feed us at each faculty meeting?"

Without missing a beat, Peg O'Brien said, "You can feed yourself, Teal!"

"All right, all right, but seriously," Frank replied, "what about our current evaluation that has five categories in nine areas to be checked? You know, 'exceeds expectations,' 'above expectations,' 'meets expectations,' 'improvement needed,' and 'you're fired.'"

"Well, what do you think? Do you like that?" Leslie asked.

"No, and it doesn't fit your definition of evaluation," Frank retorted.

"That's my definition. For this to be effective, we need a collective definition," Leslie replied.

"Can I interrupt?" asked Betty Bower, the LD teacher. "I know I speak for all my friends here, and I know you truly care, so I say this with all due respect. You are the fourth principal we have had in the last nine years. How can a principal evaluate me or anyone when they only observe us three times a year in years when we are being supervised? And, what's more, how can you determine any growth? By the time my three-year cycle comes up again, you will probably be a central-office administrator. The only people who really know me and can see my growth are my peers."

"You said that better than I could, Betty," Leslie said. "Perhaps I need to give my definition of supervision. I would define supervision as a method for professionals to work together in order to provide for professional growth. Here's where one professional talks about curriculum or pedagogy with another professional or professionals. They meet to discuss what they are doing and how they can help one another. The observation can be the vehicle for one or more professionals to watch their colleague work on this professional growth. I know that sounds too much like a textbook. But I guess what I mean is that supervision means one professional helping another to become a better teacher. It doesn't necessarily have to be with the observation form we are currently using. There are many techniques that one person can use to observe another, and I can share these with you. And we don't

"You are the fourth principal we have had in the last nine years. How can a principal evaluate me or anyone when they only observe us three times a year in years when we are being supervised?"

Leslie thought for a moment. "You know, I think we have to define for ourselves the terms 'supervision' and 'evaluation.' Evaluation, to me, means that someone has determined whether or

only have to think of supervision as observation. Supervision can include other areas in professional development.”

Sensing she was rambling, Leslie concluded with, “Tell you what. I will go make some more tea. If you all could spend the next forty minutes in small groups discussing these issues. . . . Wait, let’s not bite off more than we can chew. Let’s save the summative evaluations for another time. Let’s focus on how we can make observations or teacher supervision more meaningful.”

Over the next forty minutes things progressed satisfactorily. The teachers were on the task at hand, but perhaps less enthusiastically than Leslie had hoped. Still, she knew progress is slow and painstaking at times. At the end of the forty minutes, the small groups reported back to the main group. Much of the discussion was similar between the groups, but a few interesting points came forth.

Mary Thompson spoke for her group. “We would like to see what you have for different techniques to observe teachers. We mean that we want to see how else we can be observed rather than using our traditional observation form.”

Ben Tierney voiced a concern common to all groups. “We would like to maybe observe and work more with each other, but where is the time? I simply don’t have the time to pre-conference, observe, and post-conference with all my colleagues. Where do we get the time for all this?

Maybe that’s why principals do it. What it lacks in effectiveness, it makes up for in efficiency.” Laughter rolled across the tables.

“As building rep for our collective bargaining unit,” Hannah Sargent said, “this is a good discussion, but I don’t know if our contract will permit this.”

Tom Brentley interrupted. “I don’t see why not. We won’t be evaluating each other! Right, Les?”

Leslie just smiled. She wasn’t sure how to respond.

A kindergarten teacher, Vicki Gibson, raised her hand. “You know, the end of the day is upon us. And I hate to think of another committee, but I would be willing to look into this if others were interested.”

Mike Tippler, the phys. ed. teacher, said, “Me, too.” Leslie made eye contact with a couple of teachers. Mike always wanted to work on committees with Vicki.

“I’ll work with them,” Mary Thompson added.

“And I’ll chaperone,” muttered Hannah, amid the giggles of a few of her colleagues and the blushes of Vicki. Mike didn’t even notice as he cracked his knuckles.

Leslie wrapped the meeting up. “Okay. I’ll work with you and we’ll report back at the next faculty meeting in October.” She walked off humming to herself the theme song from *Caddyshack*, “I’m all right, don’t nobody worry about me. . . .”