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Begin the Day With a New Question

By [Jill Berkowicz](#) and [Ann Myers](#) on September 15, 2013 7:50 AM | [No comments](#)

The current reform agenda in education is based upon a basic belief that we are not good enough. That belief has seeped into our offices and our classrooms and even into our psyches. We must not allow that to continue. We do need to get better results, especially with those children living in poverty. Now external forces are driving the changes we make and the timeline on which we make them. We know the damage done when children are told they are not good enough. We now resist the same consequences for ourselves and our staff.

Who among us is prepared to lead change when feeling judged and being publicly being told we are not meeting the mark? We must make that the static on the line and turn down its volume. Internalizing the belief that we can do better and leading the shift in schools is a mammoth undertaking. Doing so is not simply an external job of meetings, trainings, and evaluation or of accessing new resources. The dust has been kicked up and it leaves us dealing with a culture of fear. Teachers and principals are fearful of their new evaluations and their jobs. Students and parents are fearful of the new assessments and of their unknown results. Teachers and principals are fearful of being scored themselves and of the student, parental and public responses.

Central to preventing this fear from strangling our schools is the recognition that it exists in the first place. Parker Palmer asks *"How, and why, does academic culture discourage us from living connected lives?"* (p. 36). Whether its purpose is useful or not, grading separates. This reform agenda has infiltrated the system; fear is on steroids. Was the intention to make us more creative and encourage better performance from all? Is it all because we hold tight to old practice and *"collaborate with the structures of separation because they promise to protect us..."*(p.37).

Conversations can lead us away from this fear - not telling, not feedback, but good, open, honest, difficult conversations. Developing the capacity to be what David Whyte has termed "Chief Conversationalist" is essential. Within conversations, things can change. Most of us begin our days thinking about what work has to be done. Perhaps we don't want to take advice from a poet, turned organizational consultant, but [David Whyte](#) does offer a bit of wisdom. He suggests we should come to work asking ourselves, ***"What courageous conversations are we not having?"*** From his website, he explains,

Conversational leadership emphasizes keen attention, self-discipline, and a certain kind of artistry in engaging and communicating with others. Conversational leadership does not mean indulging in endless talking but rather identifying and engaging with the crucial and often courageous exchanges that facilitate meaningful change.

The changes our schools need are organizational, systemic shifts involving the manner in which each of us does our work. The leader, as always, is central to this process. The behavior of the leader affects the behavior of the organization. So take hope from that fact. The first change has to be made within each of us. And over that, we have to have control. No matter the external pressures as they bear down upon us, our capacity to have these person to person conversations makes a difference. 'What conversations aren't we having?' is a powerful question to ask ourselves every day. Whether with faculty, staff, students, supervisors,

uncovering what is keeping fearfulness alive and community from being created and reinforced can be shifted through these conversations.

One example of shifting to conversation sits within the observation process. Following observations, many of us have been taught to say some positive things before we make suggestions for change. This process has always placed the observer in the role of perceived critic and the observed in the place of one who needs to change, suggesting they are not 'good enough'. It is most definitely a kind of feedback session in which the 'most important' information comes from the evaluator as instructions for improvement.

What do you think about when you hear the word 'feedback'? Most of us think about being told what we did well and what we need to improve. Much of the time the purpose of 'what they did well' part is truly to soften the blow about what has to be improved. "Can I give you some feedback?" never sounds good. Feedback can become a one-way communication. When it does, it is not true feedback. This is hardly a place from which improved practice will grow. No one can expect to be motivated to learn and change once they have received this kind of 'feedback' on their performance. Change may result, but it is more likely to be from fear than from understanding. There is little chance that connection, passion, or motivation will grow from this process. But honestly approaching this as a conversation holds great promise.

The reform effort continues and its impact on our systems remains titanic (humor intended). No matter what happens, we do have control over ourselves. We can, as individuals, bring a new energy into our buildings by employing the art of conversation. We cannot ignore the situation that lies before us. Nor can we ignore how our faculties are feeling. We can only change how we interact. Conversations, accompanied with honest intention and good listening can make a difference. Conversational leadership can change the culture and climate in our schools. Whyte says *"engaging in conversational leadership is to 'invite what you do not expect', bringing you to the frontier of what is emerging in your organization and asking you to turn into it, rather than away from it."* This is the essential turn for educators this year...into the educational frontier, together.

Resource:

Palmer, Parker(2007). *The Courage To Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass

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