Creating an Environment for Excellence

Excellence is an elusive term, hard to define yet easy to recognize. It is also fairly easy to describe the type of environment that nurtures excellence. Not surprisingly, the same environmental factors which promote excellence among students promote excellence among teachers. These factors are explained in Dimensions of Learning (Marzano and Pickering, 1997), a framework for teaching and learning for K-12 classrooms (see sidebar — A One Minute Overview of Dimensions of Learning). When we remind ourselves that exemplary teachers are actually learners themselves, always learning from their students and their peers, we can see the value of reinterpreting the Dimensions of Learning framework from an administrative point of view. What can this framework teach us about fostering excellence among faculty members? If we were to view these principles as “Dimensions of Excellence” for faculty development, how would the school workplace change? The power of the Dimensions of Learning framework is that it can serve as a lens for interpreting our current school working environment while providing us with planning tools to help redesign the workplace as needed.

The foundation for establishing an environment of excellence is to recognize the importance of the teacher’s attitudes and perceptions about the workplace. There are two important areas of attitudes and perceptions to address in this domain: feelings about the workplace climate and feelings about job-related tasks.

Workplace Climate — Comfort, Order, Acceptance
One basic need in the workplace climate is a sense of comfort and order. While the individual teacher is primarily responsible for the orderliness and comfort of his classroom, there are important responsibilities for administrators in this area. Administrators create orderly work environments by communicating clear policy for the school or system. Each teacher must know the policy constraints under which she will work. Many policy books are too large or “wordy” to be of use by classroom teachers. The same could be said of some curriculum guides. It is an administrative responsibility to provide training or perhaps a “guide for dummies” to facilitate consistent implementation of policy and curriculum.

The general condition of a school plant is another administrative responsibility. A comfortable work environment includes, among other things, adequate heating and/or cooling, restroom facilities, office and classroom furniture, and lighting. The general state of the school building also contributes to the perception of workplace comfort. Arriving for work at a neatly painted building that is kept in good repair does wonders for a teacher’s attitude toward the workplace.

Also important to a sense of comfort is the issue of personal safety. Teachers must perceive their work environment as a “safe place” for them physically, intellectually, and socially. The idea of physical safety includes freedom from attack or injury caused by equipment or persons in the work environment. Intellectual safety is tied to issues of academic freedom and the concept that teachers can use their best judgment without being “taken-to-task” for petty incidents.

The concept of social safety leads directly to the other domain of workplace climate: a climate of acceptance. A teacher needs to feel that she is accepted in the workplace if she is to do
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excellent work. This includes a perception of acceptance by fellow teachers, administrators, and parents of students. Administrators have the primary responsibility for establishing this climate of acceptance. In the Adventist educational system, this role is typically filled by superintendents, associate superintendents, principals (in larger schools), and school board chairs. There are several specific principles and techniques we can use in a conscious effort to improve the climate of acceptance among our faculty members.

I have identified several principles for creating a positive workplace climate for a faculty, particularly the geographically-distributed faculty supervised by the typical SDA conference administrator (Kostner, 1994; Marzano and Pickering, 1997; Byham, 1992). Each principle is followed by sample questions which can be used to start thinking about how that principle could be made operational.

**Principles for Fostering a Positive Workplace Climate**

- **Structure time for teachers to get to know one another.** What social events can I plan at yearly conventions or in-service sessions? Can we establish and support regional study groups?

- **Get to know your teachers beyond the classroom walls.** What are the teachers’ interests? What about the teacher’s family?

- **Include your teachers in planning.** What school-wide, or conference-wide focus would teachers suggest? What concerns do they have regarding trends in their students that need to be addressed by the entire faculty? What curriculum changes do they feel are needed?

- **Treat your teachers equitably.** Do I tend to spend more time with a particular teacher socially or professionally? Is there a faculty member I shun?

- **Communicate more than you think is necessary.** How can I use traditional letters and newsletters to their best potential? Can I set up an e-mail listserv for my faculty?
Check to see if what teachers heard was what you meant to say. What about monthly “town hall” meetings with teachers in a given region?

Ask your teachers for advice — and be ready to listen. What areas of administration typically give me the most headaches? How do teachers view these problem areas?

Recognize excellence publically and do it often. What exciting things do I see as you visit classrooms? How do I share that with the entire team?

A K-12 workplace example

One specific technique for promoting a climate of acceptance is to provide faculty members with opportunities to work together collaboratively (Marzano and Pickering, 1997; Joyce and Showers, 1996; Murphy, 1992). The importance of collaborative work among members of school faculties in school improvement initiatives is also supported in the educational literature. Bruce Joyce (19??), in a meta-analysis of research related to school improvement, identified five “pathways” to school improvement, and collegial interaction was one of the pathways he identified.

The Carolina Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has used teacher study groups to promote collegial interaction and learning among its faculty since 1991 (Green and Henriquez-Roark, 1993) (see also Rita Henriquez-Green in this issue). These groups of six to eight teachers meet on a regular basis, an average of one hour per week, to work on the development of their professional skills as teachers. Team members practice new teaching strategies, develop curriculum, and support one another in the change process. While the primary focus of these small groups is the development of specific instructional and curricular skills, teacher study groups deal with other issues on an as-needed basis. This collaborative approach to personal and
professional development creates synergy among faculty members which is essential to the promotion of excellence.

**Workplace Tasks — Value, Clarity, Ability**

The second foundational area for creating an environment of excellence deals with a teacher’s job-related tasks. Many of the tasks teachers do on a given day are assigned by administrators, governing bodies or tradition. Other tasks, however, are self-generated. Regardless of the origin of the task, assigned or self-generated, the teacher operates based on their perceptions of the task’s *value*, the *clarity* of their understanding of the task, and their *ability* to perform the task.

All of us are confronted with many tasks which vie for our attention each day. The tasks we value are usually the ones that receive our quality attention and are completed either quickly or well. It is the task of the administrator to screen assigned tasks to make sure those tasks actually need to be completed. Secondly, the administrator ensure that the relevance of the task is clearly communicated to each teacher. Asking for certain completed data forms is not as powerful as asking for the data *and explaining why* it is important for the students, the teachers, and the system.

Jacylyn Kostner (1994) uses the metaphor of King Arthur and his vision for Camelot to illustrate the importance of clarity in communicating assigned tasks. In her story, Arthur first shares his vision for Camelot with his knights and sends them off to complete their assigned tasks by a certain deadline. At the appointed time, the knights return with their building materials only to discover that each had a slightly different understanding of the assigned task. The materials the
knights supplied were hopelessly incompatible with one another. And even worse, the materials didn’t even represent what the king had requested. In trying to save time and get the work started, Arthur had sacrificed the clarity of his vision. Within the pressing time demands of all administrators, it is imperative that we make the time needed to clearly communicate work assignments to our faculty. Otherwise we promote confusion and dissatisfaction.

It is also imperative that teachers are equipped to perform the tasks we assign. I still remember my introduction to cooperative learning. During a one-day inservice session, we teachers were scheduled to view an excellent two-hour videotape on cooperative learning. However the agenda had a mind of its own and the allotted two hours became 55 minutes instead. We dutifully viewed the first half of the tape and I was intellectually stimulated. I wanted to learn more about this teaching strategy. However, I was a bit shocked when our administrator ended the session by stating that he expected to see us using cooperative learning when he next visited our classrooms. By viewing the tape, I had some understanding of the value of cooperative learning. My administrator had clearly communicated the assigned task — he wanted to see the same things happening in my classroom that I had seen on the tape. My problem was ability. I had no clue how to make those things happen in my classroom. I had only arrived at the awareness stage of this innovation and my administrator was expecting implementation by his next visit. I could have chosen to panic, to seek the training I needed on my own, or to ignore the assigned task. I chose to ignore it.

Below are principles for shaping perceptions toward workplace tasks (Kostner, 1994; Marzano and Pickering, 1997; Byham, 1992). Again, each principle is followed by sample
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questions which can be used to start thinking about how to make that principle operational.

Principles for Fostering Positive Attitudes Toward Workplace Tasks

- Clearly communicate your vision for the school or school system. What is the “big picture” that guides the decisions I make as an administrator? How can I, as an administrator, clearly communicate that vision to my instructional team?

- Use paraphrasing and discussion techniques to promote “vision understanding” among teachers. In my presentations about organizational vision, do I do all the talking, or do I invite feedback from the teachers? Do I provide time and incentive for teachers to discuss the “big picture” among themselves?

- Help teachers understand how assigned tasks “fit” into the overall vision for your school or school system. Do I connect work assignments to my vision for the school? Do I question assignments’ contributions to our school vision (even those assignments handed down from higher levels of administration or those assignments that “we have always done that way”)?

- Actively seek suggestions. Do I encourage teachers to contribute ideas for school improvement, in-service directions, and time-saving techniques? Do my teachers know I want their input about school functioning?

- Value and “protect” teachers ideas. When teachers make suggestions, do I value those suggestions? How do I show those ideas are important to me? Do I equally value suggestions from all teachers?

- Provide teachers with reasonable autonomy. What decisions do I leave to the classroom teacher’s prerogative? What fraction of the classroom day do I try to control? How much “academic freedom” do I promote or allow? How do I demonstrate my respect for my faculty as productive adults?

- Combine teacher autonomy with administrative support. Do teachers know I am on their side? What have I done in the past year that shows my faculty I am working for their best interests? How have I demonstrated that I know “what’s going on” in their classrooms? Do I provide non-judgmental support to teachers in need?

- Provide training and support to enable teachers to develop the ability to perform complex tasks. Do I adequately estimate the complexity of tasks I assign? Does the in-service training agenda in my school or school system over
A K-12 workplace example

In the past, educational systems have functioned under the assumption that “hearing about” something was equivalent to “learning how to do” it. Thus, the preponderance of one-shot in-service sessions, such as my introduction to cooperative learning. However, the reality for most of the population (Joyce & Showers, 1995) is that we need to “hear about” an innovation, see it demonstrated, practice it ourselves, get feedback on our performance, and have all of the above continue over a significant period of time in a collaborative environment.

The administrative team for the schools of the Illinois Conference of Seventh-day Adventists developed and implemented such an approach to their in-service and convention training sessions. A topic or educational practice is selected for emphasis based on administrative direction and teacher input. The teachers in Illinois then progress through a series of planned experiences focusing on the selected innovation for a period of two or three years. To date, the teachers have studied (and implemented) cooperative learning and thematic instruction. The next planned focus of training in the Illinois Conference is integration of technology into the curriculum.

Excellence doesn’t occur by accident. Excellence is the result of specific personal and environmental factors. Why not try addressing the environmental factors described in this article? Then watch excellence emerge in your school(s).

(I invite comments and/or questions about this article via e-mail. Contact me at burton@andrews.edu.)
A One-minute Overview of Dimensions of Learning

*Dimensions of Learning* (Marzano and Pickering, 1997) is a framework for planning and implementing instruction that goes beyond simple factual memorization and recall. **Dimension 1**, which lays the groundwork for instruction, deals with an individual’s attitudes and perceptions about learning. Effective teachers must plan to deal with student’s issues related to the climate of the classroom and to the tasks assigned by the teacher. Climate issues center around two basic questions, “Do I feel accepted by peers and teachers?” and “Do I perceive a sense of comfort and order?” Student attitudes regarding classroom tasks are shaped by the perceived value of the task, the clarity with which the assignment is made, and the student’s perception of his or her ability to successfully perform the task.

**Dimension 2** deals with the processes learners use to acquire new knowledge and connect it to previous learning. Learners regularly encounter declarative, procedural and contextual knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to facts, concepts, and generalizations. In short, declarative knowledge is something the learner *knows* or *understands*. Procedural knowledge refers to processes performed by the mind or the body; it is something the learner *does*. Contextual knowledge is the ability to use procedural knowledge appropriately *in context*. For example, if a person wants to plan a trip from Maine to Virginia, does she use a globe, a world atlas, or a US atlas?

Extending and refining knowledge is the domain of **Dimension 3**. The Dimensions of Learning framework includes several higher-order thinking processes to help learners extend their
knowledge and refine their understandings and skills. These include processes such as classification, induction, deduction, and questioning. In addition to helping students extend and refine their knowledge, these processes prepare or equip the learner to make meaningful use of their knowledge.

The focus of **Dimension 4** is making meaningful use of knowledge. The Dimensions of Learning framework identifies six complex reasoning processes which promote application of student learning through the completion of long-term tasks. These are decision making, problem solving, invention, experimental inquiry, investigation, and systems analysis.

Productive habits of mind are the goal of **Dimension 5**. These habits can be described as traits of the lifelong learner and include the three broad area of creative thinking, critical thinking, and self-regulatory thinking. Rather than discussing the importance of these traits and hoping they develop in learners, the *Dimensions of Learning* framework presents explicit planning and assessment techniques to ensure the development of such habits.


