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Helping Teachers Set Goals

Thomas L. McGreal

Goal setting is an essential part of an effective supervisory model—if teachers and supervisors know how to do it. Here are some suggestions.

Many supervisors and teachers faced with the requirement of jointly establishing goals as part of a required classroom evaluation/supervisory process are finding the task uncomfortable and difficult. In working with over 200 school districts around the country, I have seen the consternation firsthand. While many districts have mandated the process, most have neglected to provide even minimum amounts of training to supervisors and teachers in how to set classroom instructional goals effectively. In my experience, the success of any evaluation/supervisory system is directly related to the training the supervisors and teachers have had to help them become informed participants in the process.

Most of the suggestions that follow have been effective in improving goal-setting activities in a variety of school settings. They are appropriate whether the goal setting is a mutually developed activity between the teacher and the supervisor or the result of an evaluation procedure requiring the supervisor to take the initiative in determining problem areas and then translating them into goals.

Establishing the Purpose of Goal Setting

It is particularly important that school districts identify early what they see as the primary purpose of their evaluation system. This is not always an easy task since most districts are caught between providing growth opportunities for their increasing number of tenured teachers and the incessant demands to weed out bad teachers.

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My experience suggests that districts would find it more productive to create evaluation systems that focus on improving teaching skills rather than on evaluating teacher performance. As most states have a well-defined due process procedure that must be followed in attempting to dismiss tenured teachers, it seems likely that the required steps in the process can serve as the evaluation model to be followed once a teacher has been identified for potential dismissal. No school district needs to have evaluation procedures that are designed to identify incompetent teachers. Every supervisor already knows who the incompetent teachers are. If the supervisor, the superintendent, and the board of education are willing to pay the price in terms of time, energy, and political backlash, then the law provides the only evaluation system that works. On the other hand, 98 percent of the tenured teachers in this country will never be affected by evaluation. They will never be dismissed, or held up on a salary schedule. It seems inappropriate, therefore, to adopt an evaluation system that forces comparisons among teachers for no real purpose, asks supervisors to make evaluative judgments that will never be used, and serves only to strain the relationship between the teacher and the supervisor. Consequently, the development of a teaching-oriented supervisory model makes considerable sense.

While many districts insist that they truly wish a nonthreatening model, many have never clearly analyzed their required procedures, processes, and instrumentation to see if they are in fact oriented toward instructional improvement. For example, if the primary reason for developing a new evaluation/supervision system is to help improve teaching skills, then the major reason for establishing goals should be to provide a narrow, more workable focus that allows for the collection of descriptive data appropriate for use in a formative sense. This process should be distinct from procedures that require goal setting as a means of establishing measurable criteria for summative teacher evaluation. These different perspectives have a profound influence on the way goals are established and on the relationship between the classroom supervisor and the teacher.

A clear understanding of the primary purpose also has significant implications for a number of important questions that are continuously raised by both supervisors and teachers. How many goals should be set? Should they be measurable? Should they always be remedial in nature? The answers to these questions are tied to the major purpose of the evaluation procedure. If instructional improvements, teacher growth, and increased self-confidence are the primary purposes of setting goals, then the number of goals is less important than the quality of the goal or goals that are set. A single goal may be sufficient. When the emphasis is on evaluation, it becomes important that the goals established provide an objective data base for use in making judgments. If instructional improvement is the primary purpose, then the ease of measurability becomes less of an issue.

The question of subjective versus objective judgment plays an important role. If we require teachers always to set measurable goals, then by the nature of the teaching and learning act we are limiting ourselves to specific results on the part of the student and/or the teacher. This approach puts a severely restrictive limit on the kinds of things that one can work toward in a classroom. It limits options for improving the means of instruction and focuses the teacher's attention almost exclusively on answers to specific questions or situations. On the other hand, if one accepts the view that judgments made by trained and experienced supervisors and teachers are in fact valid measures, then the vista of goals is opened up considerably.[1] Relying on judgments from subjective data allows teachers to set broader goals that are less measurable by traditional means, but which may address significant and important teaching skills and practices in the classroom.

For these reasons it is extremely important that districts establish early the real purpose for altering their evaluation system. If improving instruction and teaching skills is the main point, then the procedures, processes, instrumentation, and flexibility built into the system must be complementary to that purpose.

Establishing Appropriate Attitudes

One of the major reasons for increased use of goal setting is dissatisfaction with the use of common criteria such as rating scales and short narrative formats as standards for summative evaluation. In a

[1] See Gene V. Glass, "Teacher Effectiveness," in *Evaluating Educational Performance*, edited by Herbert Walberg (Berkeley, Cal.: McCutchan Publishing Co., 1974) p. 11 for a brief discussion of the use of subjective judgments in evaluation.

sense, the setting of goals is a way of establishing individual criteria for use in teacher supervision. It forms, in effect, the basis of the relationship between the supervisor and the teacher. Consequently, both supervisors and teachers must adopt an attitude that says: "This is what we will be looking at during our supervisory period and we must both learn to avoid extraneous critiques on criteria other than those established by the goals." (Obviously there would be certain exceptions to this, particularly in regard to teaching practices that could be physically or emotionally damaging to students.)

This approach often proves difficult for supervisors to accept and understand. Traditionally, evaluation has been viewed as synonymous with observation—the typical observation being an unplanned visit to a classroom, at which time the supervisor attempts to take in everything that is occurring and to select those things about which he or she feels most comfortable or uncomfortable. In a goal-setting situation, the established goals become the parameters that focus the attention of the supervisor on what is happening in a classroom. Any attempts to throw in additional criteria during a conference following observations can only lead to an erosion of the very things that make goal setting a useful technique.

Setting Priorities

What are appropriate goals? What are important goals? What kind of goals are worthwhile? These are nearly always among the first questions asked once teachers and supervisors are required to set goals. While the ideal supervisory system allows supervisors and teachers to have maximum flexibility in determining what would be most appropriate in each situation, it is important that both have some framework to use in thinking about what kinds of goals would be more worthwhile.

There are three general categories of goals that teachers and supervisors may set. Because the average supervisor-teacher contact during an evaluation period is less than one percent of the teacher's time, the highest priority goals should be those that promise to pay the greatest dividends in teacher growth for the amount of time expended. The types of goals and some examples follow:

1. *Program Goals*

- To review and make appropriate changes in a seventh-grade language arts program;
- To introduce the new reading series to the second grade;
- To revise the contemporary American writer's unit for my fourth-period advanced literature class;
- To review the thematic units used in my fifth-grade social studies program;
- To improve articulation between science programs in fourth and fifth grades.

While the importance of program goals cannot be denied, there are a variety of ways they can be worked on apart from the supervisory system. These include curriculum committees, articulation groups, meetings with parent groups, and department or grade level meetings. Consequently, goals set by teachers that involve some manipulation of content would seem to have the lowest priority among the three categories of goals.

I often find that teachers, when asked to set a goal as part of the evaluation/supervisory system, like to set program goals because they are much less personal. The feeling is that manipulation of materials, program objectives, and other curricular resources does not touch them personally, so it is less threatening. Since the major purpose of a supervisory system is to help teachers improve their own skills, allowing them to set program goals misses the point of a supervisory system.

2. *Learner Goals*

- At least 80 percent of the students will be able to correctly identify at least 80 percent of the problems on a long division test.
- The students will be able to demonstrate their ability to write a descriptive essay.
- The students will show an increased appreciation for the American free enterprise system.
- My fifth-grade class will be able to identify the Presidents of the United States by October 15.
- At least 70 percent of my students will be reading at grade level by February 15.

Certainly learner goals provide an opportunity to measure more accurately how well the teacher met a pre-established goal. However, the ends-orientation of this kind of goal setting would seem to do less in affecting the means of instruction. There

would be times when learner goals would be appropriate, but I consider them to be lower priority than the third category. Assuming we should look for the highest dividends for time spent, it is less productive to emphasize goals that relate to highly specific situations and conditions that have a tendency to change from year to year—as would be the case in dealing with very specific learning achievement in particular classes. This is clearly an arguable point, and one that each district should face as local guidelines are provided to teachers and supervisors regarding the expectations for goal-setting activities.

3. *Teaching Goals*

- Increase use of instructional objectives in developing classroom teaching strategies.
- Develop procedures for increasing the amount and quality of student-teacher verbal interaction.
- Increase the number of extended student-teacher contacts and student ideas in lecture-discussion settings.
- Increase my level of enthusiasm by the use of more overt physical actions (voice, gesture, facial expression, movement).
- Tailor my questioning style to the different ability levels in my classroom.
- Increase involvement of students through the use of more student-centered teaching techniques.
- Be able to show the relationships among my teaching method, what I am trying to teach, and the kinds of students I have.
- Provide an increased number of verbal structuring comments in order to present concepts more clearly.
- Increase my use of the direct instruction teaching model in basic skills instruction.
- Improve the logical presentation of concepts as presented in directed discussion.

Setting individual teaching goals offers the best chance for more personal involvement on the teacher's part because these kinds of goals focus specifically on the teacher's behavior rather than on the students or on the program. Also, the setting of more broad teaching goals can be built around many of the practices being studied and identified in current teacher effectiveness research.[2] In this way, there is an opportunity to build into the process of instructional improvement work in areas that offer research support justifying the time spent by the supervisor and teacher. Dealing with these kinds of goals addresses the facts that the average teacher is confronted each year—or in some instances each semester—by different students, texts, sets of objectives, ability levels, and expectations from the administration and the community. Thus, a teaching goal built around a non-content specific general teaching skill stays with the teacher to the benefit of future students.

It is also appropriate that both supervisors and teachers accept the notion that not all goal setting needs to be remedial in nature. This is a problem that has existed since goal setting became a common practice in education. In many respects it grows out of MBO (management by objectives) models; PPBS (planning, programming, budgeting systems); and to a considerable extent, from administrative evaluation activities in which most goal setting is reduced to a problem-solving game. Goals in effect become the listing of the problems that must be solved in order for one to be satisfactorily evaluated or measured. Again, this points out the importance of establishing the purpose of goal setting. If instructional improvement and personal growth are the major purposes of establishing goals, then the supervisor and the teacher should have the option of setting a goal that in fact may not be a problem or a weakness for a teacher. It may be a skill or an area of interest that the teacher and the supervisor feel might be interesting, challenging, and useful to other teachers, to the school, or to the school district. While the majority of goals set be-

[2] For a good review of current teacher effectiveness research see T. Good, C. Biddle, and J. Brophy, *Teachers Make a Difference* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975); and D. Berliner and B. Rosenshine, "The Acquisition of Knowledge in the Classroom," *Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study*, Technical Report Series (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory, 1976).

Themes of Future Issues

We are planning a theme issue on [illegible] ance of education for October 1980. Manuscripts to be considered for that issue should be submitted by July 1. Other topics for 1980-81 will probably include language learning, citizenship education, and curriculum development.

tween supervisors and teachers should deal with areas that are particularly appropriate for that teacher's classroom, this option should be available and understood by both the teacher and the supervisor.

Negotiating Goals

The purpose of the goal-setting activity also becomes vital in the actual negotiation of goals between the teacher and the supervisor. If instructional improvement is the primary purpose, then it is important that the goal-setting activity be a mutually developed, cooperative venture. This is particularly true when working with experienced and/or tenured teachers. It is the supervisor's responsibility to establish an atmosphere in the conference that will give teachers the opportunity to be an equal participant in the process. On the other hand, the teacher bears a responsibility for being willing to contribute to the discussion. If the supervisor asks a teacher what he or she would like to work on this year, and the teacher responds, "Nothing," it forces the supervisor to dictate what the goals will be. This undermines the process for both the supervisor and the teacher. To that extent, there is responsibility on both sides. However, it is the supervisor who must make the decision as to the acceptability of the final goals.

If conferences are to proceed constructively, it is necessary for supervisors to establish ahead of time the strategy they will use to make the conference as productive as possible. In most instances, supervisors know the teachers well enough to have some sense of what they can expect in regard to the kinds of goals they will suggest. It is important that supervisors consider supervision to be a long-term process and that a major goal of this activity is to get teachers to see the usefulness of it and to eliminate threat as much as possible.

One thing I have learned in working with thousands of teachers and supervisors is that instructional improvement never happens unless the teacher wants it to. A supervisor, therefore, must be willing to negotiate and compromise on issues that he or she feels will contribute in the long run to the growth of the teacher. For example, Supervisor A knows Teacher B is already an extremely well-organized person whose teaching is characterized by a high degree of structure and formality. It is the supervisor's feeling, however, that Teacher B ought to work toward building and improving his or her relationships with students, in the belief that it would promote increased learning. Supervisor A knows that Teacher B will suggest a goal built around the strengths that B already possesses. Thus, the issue for the supervisor becomes:

> Do I give in at this point, let Teacher B set a goal that is directed toward a significant strength, and then try to bargain for a second goal that addresses the problem I feel exists in the classroom? Or, based on my knowledge of this person, should I literally give away this goal for this year in the hopes that the positive attitude that my acceptance will promote in the teacher will allow me the opportunity to suggest a different goal next year? On the other hand, do I feel strongly enough about the tremendous importance of improved classroom climate in Teacher B's room to overrule Teacher B's preferred goal and dictate that B will work towards the climate goal?

The supervisor must determine which of these strategies offers the greatest opportunity for generating commitment on the part of the teacher. Without the willingness of the teacher to be an active participant in the process, everyone involved has a tendency to "walk through" the activity merely to meet requirements. Generally speaking, the time has passed when supervisors could coerce teachers, particularly tenured teachers, into changing their classroom behavior. While ideally there is joint responsibility for establishing a positive environment during goal setting, in practice, the burden is almost exclusively on the supervisor.

I feel strongly about the importance of goal setting as a necessary part of a satisfactory supervisory system. However, I do find it unfair to both supervisors and teachers to suddenly confront them with a new evaluation/supervision model that requires a goal-setting activity without any training or understanding as to the complexities involved and the promise it offers. Perhaps the suggestions offered here will prove useful in enhancing the chances for success. EL

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