



Fostering a Culture of Authentic Professional Dialogue and Feedback

By Tracey Ezard

In nurturing educators and leaders to enhance their capabilities, building a culture centred on professional development is crucial. This growth unfolds not only in response to coaching discussions on development but also through deep collaborative learning within teams of colleagues. Instead of merely containing feedback, a thriving professional culture embodies growth and learning.

A Culture of Growth, Beyond Feedback

For many educators, the term "feedback" carries negative connotations, often interpreted solely as criticism rather than constructive observation and an opportunity for growth. Schools where professionals are acknowledged as continual learners are creating a culture of continuous capacity building. Such environments have a spirited energy, founded on collaboration, trust and learning. These schools have what I call 'The Buzz.' They are

dynamic places to work, characterized by vibrant learning environments. The palpable sense of purpose fosters an eagerness to explore new approaches to transformative work. Crucially, the quality of dialogue is rich and exploratory, fostering both collective and individual reflections on practice.

At the heart of these discussions lies the impact on students, who thrive in environments where educators are dedicated to making a difference in their learning journey. Educators who grow and learn together generate momentum and collective impact. Strong learning loops and deep dialogue are critical to this success.

Authentic Dialogue - The Cornerstone of Quality Feedback

Authentic dialogue requires a level of courage and vulnerability. For people to step into a deep level of

conversation around their practice, leaders who hold the space for both safety and create an environment where both compassion and accountability can thrive. Our values are in action in these instances. Our values are evident in our interactions and language choices. Here are some core principles that leaders can embody to cultivate a culture of authentic dialogue:

Dialogue over Monologue: Meaningful discussions are two-way exchanges. By fostering conversations where both parties actively engage, rather than delivering monologues, a transformative shift occurs. The key to this principle is adopting an attitude of curiosity. Set out on any conversation, whether feedback oriented or other with an attitude of ask, not tell. As the late Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* would remind us, it's amazing what can be uncovered when seeking to understand comes before being understood.

Partnership over Adversity: Adversarial conversation gets us nowhere fast. The neuroscience findings of great trust-building conversations show that we are flooded by cortisol in combative dialogue, effectively shutting down our pre-frontal cortex. Going into the discussion with a positive intent for the other person and seeing the interaction as a partnership, seeking to understand each other more gives the brain more oxytocin, dopamine and serotonin. We feel connected and not on a battlefield, with our heads and our hearts engaged in the discussion.

Openness to Influence: Our conversations take a turn when we're addicted to being right. Our brains give us a rush of dopamine when we are on the right course. If we're in a strong pattern of receiving this rush, we can also experience feelings of frustration and even anger when we don't get it. When our insistence on being right trumps everyone else's perspectives, we enter a realm of win-at-all-costs, damaging trust, collaboration and partnership. Others may question the value of engaging with us, leading to one-sided interactions that people either avoid or approach defensively, anticipating conflict. Being open to influence requires receptivity to others' thoughts and emotions, and a willingness to reconsider our own viewpoints.

Listen to Connect: Being fully present in a conversation requires deep listening. Not just to the content, but to the nuance and the unsaid. If our attention is distracted, or we are simply talking at people rather than talking with them, the conversation suffers. Listening is one of the most underrated and underdeveloped skills we have at

our disposal. So many challenges and misunderstandings could be avoided if we simply listened to each other more.

The SPEAK Framework©

While various frameworks exist, I created this method to facilitate deeper dialogue from both a cognitive and emotional approach. The principles above are the foundation the SPEAK Framework© sits upon. The SPEAK Framework© moves us through stages to building understanding, and creates the space for curiosity, listening and exploration. It then moves to identifying action and gaining clarity for the next steps.

SITUATION – Define the context and mutual goals of the discussion. Share factual information and encourage additional context.

PERSPECTIVE – Exchange viewpoints, emotions and feelings. Explore differing perspectives to understand the broader context fully.

EXPLORE – Foster curiosity and partnership to delve deeper into understanding. Challenge assumptions and seek clarity on perspectives.

ALTERNATIVES – Generate ideas and options collaboratively. Co-create a plan with a balanced focus on compassion and accountability.

KNOW – Clarify expectations and follow-up actions. Ensure clear articulation of next steps and support mechanisms.

The quality of a culture can be found in the quality of the conversations. Deep dialogue values opinions and people, evidence and outcomes. Leaders modelling the art of curiosity and exploration assists educators to be willing to step into a richer space of reflection. The dialogue is about authenticity and partnership rather than power. Most of all: we build a culture of trust. With trust, anything is possible. [↗](#)

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