CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR EXCELLENCE

BY LARRY BURTON

Excellence is an elusive term—hard to define, yet easy to recognize. However, it is fairly easy to describe the environment that nurtures excellence. Not surprisingly, the same environmental factors that promote excellence among *students* also promote excellence among *teachers*. These factors are explained in *Dimensions of Learning*,[1] a framework for teaching and learning in K-12 classrooms (see sidebar—*A One-Minute Overview of Dimensions of Learning*).

By keeping in mind that teachers are actually learners themselves, always growing from interactions with their students and peers, we can see the value of the Dimensions of Learning framework from an administrative viewpoint. What can this framework teach us about fostering excellence among faculty members? The Dimensions of Learning framework can serve as a lens for interpreting our current school working environment while providing tools to help redesign the workplace.

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about workplace climate and job-related tasks.

Workplace Climate—Comfort, Order, Acceptance

An important workplace climate issue is the need for a sense of *comfort and order*. While the individual teacher is primarily responsible for the orderliness and

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comfort of his or her classroom, administrators must also help create orderly work environments by communicating clear policies to their school or system. Each teacher must know the policy constraints

under which he or she works. Many policy books and curriculum guides are too large or "wordy" to be useful for classroom teachers. Administrators need to provide training or a simplified manual to ensure consistent policy and curriculum implementation.

Administrators also have a responsibility for the school's physical plant. A comfortable work environment includes adequate heating and/or cooling, restroom facilities, office and classroom furniture, and lighting. Arriving for work at a neatly painted and well-maintained building does wonders for the teacher's and students' attitudes about the workplace.

Another important issue is *personal safety*. Teachers must perceive their work environment as a "safe place" for them physically, intellectually, and socially. Physical safety includes freedom from attack or injury caused by equipment or persons in the work environment. Intellectual safety involves issues of academic freedom and trust, i.e., allowing teachers

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to make decisions without being "taken to task" for petty incidents.

Social safety also implies a *climate of acceptance*. The educator's ability to teach successfully depends on a sense of acceptance by fellow teachers, administra-

tors, and parents. Administrators have the primary responsibility for establishing this climate. In the Adventist educational system, this role is typically filled by superintendents and their associates, principals (in larger schools), and school board chairpersons.

I have identified several principles for creating a positive workplace climate for teachers, particularly the widely scattered faculty supervised by the typical Adventist conference administrator.[2] Each principle is followed by sample questions that suggest ways to apply it:

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 their families?

• **Include your teachers in planning.**

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What school-wide or conference-wide focus would teachers suggest? What concerns do they have about 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 certain teachers, socially or professionally? Is there a faculty member I shun? Do I make myself available for consultation?

• **Communicate well and often.** How can I best use traditional letters and newsletters? Can I set up an E-mail discussion group for my faculty?

• **Check to see if what teachers heard was what you meant to say.** What about monthly regional "town hall" meetings with teachers?

• **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 publicly and often.** What exciting things do I see as I visit classrooms? How can I share these with the entire team?

A Workplace Example

One way to promote a climate of acceptance is giving faculty members opportunities to work together collaboratively.[3] In a meta-analysis of school improvement research, Bruce Joyce[4] identified collegial interaction as one of the pathways to school improvement.

Since 1991, the Carolina Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has used teacher study groups to promote collegial interaction and learning.[5] (See Profile 6 on page 35 of this issue.) These groups of six to eight teachers meet for an average of one hour per week to develop their professional skills. Team members practice new teaching strategies, develop curriculum, and support one another in the change process. While these small groups focus mostly on developing specific instructional and curricular skills, they can also deal with other issues as needed. This collaborative approach to personal and professional development stimulates synergy among faculty members, which is essential to creating excellence.

Workplace Tasks—Value, Clarity, Ability

The second foundational area for excellence relates to the teacher's job-related tasks. Such tasks are often assigned by administrators, governing bodies, or tradition. Some tasks, however, are self-generated. Regardless of the origin of the task, teachers' actions are based on their *perceptions of the task's value, the clarity of their understanding of the task, and their ability to perform it.*

Many tasks vie for attention each day. The ones people value are usually those that receive their best attention and that they do quickly and well. Administrators

must screen assigned tasks to make sure each one is vital to the school's mission. They must also ensure that teachers understand the relevance of the tasks. For example, just asking for completed data forms is not likely to be as successful as *explaining why* the information is important for the students, the teachers, and the system.

Jacylyn Kostner[6] 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 shares his vision with his knights and then 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 has a slightly different understanding of the assigned task, making the materials hopelessly incompatible. And even worse, the materials aren't what the king requested. In trying to save time and get the work started, Arthur sacrificed the clarity of his vision. Despite the pressing time demands of all administrators, they must make time to clearly communicate work assignments to the faculty. Otherwise, there will be confusion and dissatisfaction.

Teachers must be equipped to perform their assigned tasks. I still remember my introduction to cooperative learning. During a one-day in-service session, we 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 were pared down to 55 minutes. We dutifully viewed the first half of the tape, which stimulated me to want to learn more. However, I was a bit shocked when our administrator ended the session by stating that he expected us to be using cooperative learning when he next visited our classrooms.

Viewing the tape had given me some understanding of the value of cooperative

learning. My administrator did **clearly communicate** the assigned task—he wanted to see the same things happening in my classroom as in 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, while my administrator was expecting immediate implementation! I could have chosen to (1) panic, (2) seek the training I needed on my own, or (3) ignore the assigned task. I chose to ignore it.

Listed below are principles for shaping perceptions of workplace tasks.[7] Again, each principle is followed by sample questions that can help administrators apply the principles.

Principles for Fostering Positive Attitudes Toward Workplace Tasks

• **Clearly communicate your vision for the school or system.** What is the "big picture" that guides my decisions? How can I clearly communicate that vision to my instructional team?

• **Use paraphrase and discussion techniques to help teachers understand and embrace institutional vision.** In my presentations, do I do all the talking, or do I invite feedback? 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 how assignments contribute to our school vision (even those handed down by administration)?

• **Actively seek suggestions.** Do I encourage teachers to suggest ideas for school improvement, in-service directions, and time-saving techniques? Do I make it clear that I welcome their input?

• **Value and "protect" teachers' ideas.** When teachers make suggestions, do I value them? Do I value equally suggestions from all teachers?

• **Give teachers reasonable autonomy.** What decisions do I allow my teachers to make? How much of their day do I try to control? How much "academic freedom" do I promote or allow? How do I demonstrate that I respect 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 them that 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 perform complex tasks.** Do I accurately estimate the complexity of tasks I assign? Does the in-service training in my school or system demonstrate a well-thought-out plan to help train teachers to perform the complex tasks they have been assigned?

Another Workplace Example

Until recently, educational systems assumed that hearing about something was the same as learning how to do it. Thus, the prevalence of one-shot in-service sessions, such as my introduction to cooperative learning. However, for most people[8] to successfully integrate a new approach

A One-Minute Overview of Dimensions of Learning

Dimensions of Learning (DOL)* is a framework for planning and implementing instruction that goes beyond memorization and recall. **Dimension 1,** which lays the groundwork for instruction, deals with the individual's attitudes and perceptions about learning. Teachers must deal with classroom climate issues and student reactions to assigned tasks. 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 about classroom tasks are shaped by their opinion of the value of the task, the clarity of the assignment, and their perception of how successfully they can perform the task.

Dimension 2 deals with how learners acquire new knowledge and connect it to previous learning. This includes the following areas: (1) declarative knowledge (facts, concepts, and generalizations—i.e., something the learner knows or understands); (2) procedural knowledge (processes performed by the mind or the body—i.e., something the learner *does*); and (3) contextual knowledge (the ability to use procedural knowledge appropriately, i.e., *in context*).

Extending and refining knowledge comes under the domain of **Dimension 3.** This includes several higher-order thinking processes that help learners extend their knowledge and refine their understanding and skills. These include processes such as classification, induction, deduction, and questioning, which help students extend and refine their knowledge and use it meaningfully.

Dimension 4 focuses on using knowledge meaningfully. The DOL framework identifies six complex reasoning processes that help students apply their learning by completing long-term tasks: decision making, problem solving, invention, experimental inquiry, investigation, and systems analysis.

Dimension 5 seeks to develop productive habits of mind—lifelong traits of thought such as creative and critical thinking and self-regulation. Rather than simply discussing the importance of these traits, the DOL framework presents explicit planning and assessment techniques to ensure that learners develop such habits.

*Robert J. Marzano and D. J. Pickering, *Dimensions of Learning: Teacher's Manual* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997).

into their teaching, they need to "hear about" an innovation, see it demonstrated, practice it themselves, get feedback on their performance, and have all of the above continue for several years in a collaborative environment.

The administrative team for the schools of the Illinois Conference of Seventh-day Adventists use this approach for in-service and convention training sessions. After a topic or educational practice is selected for emphasis based on administrative direction and teacher input, the teachers spend several years progressing through a series of planned experiences that focus on the innovation. So far, the teachers have studied (and implemented) cooperative learning and thematic instruction. They will soon learn to integrate technology into the curriculum.

Excellence doesn't occur by accident. It is the product of specific personal and environmental factors. Try incorporating the suggestions described in this article, and watch excellence emerge in your school(s). ✐

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