

6. The One Soft Skill that Counts

By Tony Burkin

Irrespective of whether you are working with a green zone, red zone, blue zone or yellow zone teacher (*Performance Management: Fewer Snakes – More Ladders*), performance management will consist of a series of on-going honest conversations all of which will be crucial. Each will just have a very different feel to them.

Joseph Grenny is a renowned social scientist, researcher and author. He has written a number of New York Times Bestsellers. One of them, **Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High** (<https://www.amazon.com/Crucial-Conversations-Talking-Stakes-Second/dp/1469266822>), is an excellent resource if you are wishing to improve your ability to influence others' behaviours, outcomes and practices.

Based on 25 years research, Grenny and his co-authors provide a crucial piece of *the improving appraisal jigsaw*.

In one study focusing on 500 “*stunningly productive*” organisations they discovered high levels of performance had little to do with appraisal, systems or policies. They noted around half of those people identified, as high performers, had almost no formal appraisal.

In the worst organisations poor performers were ignored and tolerated. The solution was often to rotate them between teams. In most organisations, performance issues were

eventually dealt with but usually only after others had been adversely affected. In the very best organisations people at all levels were willing to step in and have honest conversations when others failed to deliver on promises or when performance issues arose. In these organisations every day was their appraisal.

Grenny recently visited what he described as the most successful organisation he had ever witnessed.

Its unique point of difference was the time taken between identifying a performance issue and communicating it to those involved. That lag time was as close to zero as Grenny had ever seen.

There was a shared expectation if someone saw a colleague do something concerning, everyone had license to share their concerns with those involved. It was the norm. By failing to do so everyone's performances ultimately suffered. What this did was create a psychologically safer workplace; if nothing was ever said you never had anything to fear. Performance management took place every day and the results spoke for themselves.

What Grenny suggests is the possibility of using your organisational culture as a stand-alone development strategy. If your culture demands teachers hold themselves to account and when they don't or can't, others do, then there is a limited place for appraisal. Appraisal instead is recognition this culture does not exist.

What would happen if you didn't have an appraisal system? Could you rely on your school's culture as a strategy – an incubator - to support and challenge red zone, yellow zone and blue zone teachers to transition into the green zone? Could your school or centre culture be your performance management solution?

In conventional orthodox organisations the answer is 'no'. The complexities and challenges in

developing such a culture exceed most leaders' capabilities. But what if it was able to be achieved using deliberately designed systems to change peoples' behaviour?

This is the work of leadership and it's entirely possible.

If you're interested this idea read our **Book Review**.

