

8. Using Conversation to Differentiate Teacher Support

Tony Burkin

In our article *Humanising Appraisal: From Performance Appraisal to Performance Management*, we identified nine teacher profiles. Often when ideas are presented in abstract fashion they can look promising on paper but what do they actually look like in practice?

What follows is a transcript of an appraisal conversation with a teacher identified as a **solid citizen**.

It's a conversation that might take place near the start of the year and it is the first of a series of

crucial conversations that would take place throughout the cycle.

It captures much of the thinking and many of ideas presented in this issue of *In the Moment*.

We hope you can see when some of the ideas are translated into practice it's possible to transform appraisal, something teachers have seen as meaningless and irrelevant, into something purposeful, relevant and rewarding.

If we get the nine conversations right for each teacher profile, appraisal can become something quite magical!

APPRAISER: *Hi Angela. Thanks for taking the time to talk about your appraisal this year. It won't take long – I know you're busy.*

TEACHER: *No problem Sarah. I know it's an important professional process. It's important to be able to prove competency.*

APPRAISER: *Well, actually that's partly what I wanted to talk about. It's good you've started there actually! Are you open to hearing me out and thinking a little differently about your appraisal this year?*

TEACHER: *Sure. Appraisal has never really helped me so if it's about making it more relevant and meaningful, I'm open to anything.*

APPRAISER: *What do you mean by meaningful and relevant? You're looking for an approach that helps you grow and improve?*

TEACHER: *I know I can be honest with you. Do you mind if I'm honest?*

APPRAISER: *Well if you can't be honest with me, I'm not sure how anything we do together will work! What you say won't go anywhere.*

TEACHER: *Well, I really can't see the point of creating a portfolio. We ask our students to do that ...it's no different to scrapbooking which I did as a kid.*
And I've always resented the way appraisal has felt like a test... also, something we do to kids.
To be honest the whole appraisal thing has always come across as patronising and low trust ...very childlike.
You see. You've got me going ... it didn't take much did it?
It's a bit of a trigger for me if I'm honest – appraisal just makes me frustrated and angry ... that we have to put so much time into something that gives you so little back!

APPRAISER: *You're not going to get any disagreement from me on most of what you've just said. Actually, I share your frustration and anger.*
But maybe I differ a little too. I do think some teachers need more of a childlike approach – but not you. I agree.
Remember the diagram we all looked at, at staff meeting recently outlining red zone, green zone, yellow zone and blue zone teachers? The traditional appraisal you're talking about is more for those red and yellow zoners.
You're in that transition phase around the blue and green zones ... you don't need that lower trust model. So instead of thinking about appraisal I'd like to think of this as performance management – where you do most of the management around your own performance.

TEACHER: *I do remember the diagram. It caused a bit of a stir. But it made sense.*
I remember it because of how Duncan responded. You know Duncan doesn't invest too much time in his planning and his deadline keeping isn't the greatest ...he said afterwards how he could see himself being seen by others as a yellow zoner.
For him to say that was quite something.

APPRAISER: *I heard that ...and Duncan wasn't the only one ...there were 1 or 2 others too.*
But let's focus on us. Rather than thinking about performance management how about thinking about how you and I might need to change?
I'd like to share with you how I want to change. Do you mind if I focus on me for the next few minutes?

TEACHER: *Sure – no problem.*

APPRAISER: *The truth of the matter is that when I look at your teaching practice and your contribution since you've been here ...2 years now ...you haven't given anyone cause to doubt your commitment and competence.*
You have strengths and areas you can improve and stretch but there's absolutely no reason why you won't be signed off at the end of the year unless something drastic happens. Take it from me. As far as I'm concerned right now, you're signed off.
I can guarantee at times this year you'll make mistakes, have regrets and wish some things might have worked out better but this would make you quite normal.

In fact, if you make mistakes, I see it as evidence you're stretching yourself and working outside your comfort zone. And I would encourage you to see this as a positive thing actually – as intelligent failure – to see failure as part of your commitment to improvement.

In fact, it would be great to talk about your failures as opposed to your successes through this process because that's where we can both learn more. Maybe we can talk more about that at another time?

TEACHER: Sure.

APPRAISER: *What I want to reassure you of is that this isn't a bureaucratic signing-off process. I also want to reassure you that if there were any concerns around your teaching practice, I'd let you know as soon as possible and between us we would both find ways to remedy that problem. I wouldn't want to see you slip into that red zone.*

My goal is to make this process as safe and as relevant for you as possible and that means removing all doubts for you. I want you to feel safe.

If I think there's a performance issue, or someone else does, I promise you the lag time between identifying it and communicating it to you will be as close to zero as possible. We will always let you know where you are. One of those cases where no news is good news!

So, your performance management. This isn't about proving yourself – you do that everyday. It's about your development and growth. I want you to know this because I think it's really important you know where you stand, you know where I stand, and I don't want you at any stage of the year to start second guessing and doing unprofessional things like feeling you have to contrive lesson observations.

That's probably enough from me for a minute ... did you have any thoughts?

TEACHER: *When you said you had an idea; I hadn't thought it would be quite so radical ...but yes ...I really like what you're saying.*

To feel trusted in this way ... to hear you say I don't need to jump through hoops really fills me with confidence. Not just in myself but in my respect for you and the leadership team.

If I'm honest, to be told in February that you can't see any reason for not signing me off in December, it makes me want to prove you right. I feel more motivated now than I've ever been in any previous appraisal.

So yes. I'd like to try this new approach.

The other thing I'm picking up is the difference between appraisal and performance management. I thought they were the same but how you've just explained things I can see how you're taking a very specific pathway with me. I like that too – like a differentiated approach. Just as we do with our students.

APPRAISER: *That's great. I thought you might like it.*

And yes, appraisal has that evaluative side that you picked up on before – the ground-hog day test year after year – whereas if we take a managed approach around your development and think about your performance as an individual learner, we can try and create a little magic for you. Well that's the hope.

Do you mind if we turn the conversation to you? I wanted to discuss briefly about how you will need to change if this is to work.

- TEACHER:** *Sure – you’ve got me curious now.*
- APPRAISER:** *You’ve probably worked out I’m saying I think you’re able to hold yourself to account – that you don’t need me or anyone else to do it.*
- So, if we can think of this as self-appraisal where you’re able to self-evaluate your practice, I think we would be making this process ... as you say ... relevant and meaningful.*
- But if we’re going to make this about your growth and learning I’d encourage you to think of yourself as a learner, not a teacher, whenever we’re working through your self-appraisal.*
- It’s easy to think of ourselves as teachers because that’s what we do ... it’s what we’re paid to do. But this isn’t helpful here. To make this process meaningful and relevant we have to change our ‘being’. Teaching is what we do. But being a learner is who we have to be.*
- I think if we’re going to transform this into a process where you manage and grow yourself with help from me, we both have to come to the process as learners ... and leave the teaching thing at the door.*
- Can you see any implications?*
- TEACHER:** *When I think of a learner I think of my students. The more successful one’s work hard ... they value effort. They persist when learning gets difficult and they don’t give up and yes, you’re right – they take personal responsibility for themselves.*
- APPRAISER:** *Everything you’ve said is absolutely right, but you’ve missed something really important. Can you think what it might be?*
- TEACHER:** *I’m not sure. If I thought about it in respect to what’s happened today, I had a bit of a breakthrough with Sean. It’s the first time I thought we’re on the right track and making progress.*
- APPRAISER:** *You’ve got me curious now. What happened?*
- TEACHER:** *Well, he asked for help. He’s shy and socially brittle. He’s very self-conscious. When he put his hand up to say he was stuck I really felt for the first time that he wanted to learn.*
- APPRAISER:** *Actually, you’ve sort of hit the nail on the head. What I heard was how Sean in a single moment worried less about his personal image and identity and placed a higher value on learning. That’s what you’re going to have to commit to this year.*
- TEACHER:** *That’s a big shift in thinking. Yes, I can see the implication. You’re saying if my appraisal is about my learning then I need to be a learner and make myself vulnerable just as we’re asking our learners to be every day.*
- APPRAISER:** *And I have to make that shift too. I’m not your appraiser as such. Remember this is about you self-appraising. I want to work alongside you as a professional learning partner. There are things we can learn about both of our teaching practices this year and we can both improve.*
- TEACHER:** *I’d never thought of appraisal as a dynamic human interaction but you’re right. If we look at it just as a system, it’s about ticking boxes.*

To inject the growth and development components it's about both of us being honest, making ourselves vulnerable and thinking about what's in the best interests of our learners than what's best for us.

Yes, I get what you're saying. If you had a fixed mind-set you could find this quite a threatening process, couldn't you?

APPRAISER: *You could and that's exactly why so many people say they want a process that allows them to grow and develop but they haven't factored in the ways they themselves have to change. And when they do make that connection many prefer going back to the old tick box approach.*

TEACHER: *I can see why that would happen, but I don't feel like that. Actually, this is really very exciting. I can't understand why people wouldn't want to think about their appraisal in this way.*

APPRAISER: *I read an article recently, which has made me think a bit.
It focused on intellectual humility. When I read it, I could think of quite a few instances in my career – too many if I'm honest – where instead of being intellectually humble I was intellectually arrogant.
I thought I was a lot better than I actually was and I closed myself off to feedback and ideas, which with more humility, I could have taken on-board and exponentially grown as a teacher.*

TEACHER: *That word "arrogant" is really strong ...it's something no one likes in others, I think.*

APPRAISER: *Sadly, it's my experience many of our colleagues ... and I include myself when I say this ... can talk a good game of being a learner but don't demonstrate it at critical moments.
When receiving feedback, we can let our ego get in the way.
When someone is observing us teach, we can let our ego get in the way by putting on a show.
We can put our relationships with each other ahead of our performance by watering down the truth.
You could argue these are all arrogant acts ... all indecent things to do because we put our personal interests ahead of our learners and professional obligations. These are things I'm trying to work on and hopefully you can help me improve in these areas through the year.
Actually, one reason I'm convinced this approach is going to work with you is because I can see your intellectual humility.
I can see how it underpins a lot of your professional decency and explains why I would say your decency quotient is high. I would be less optimistic suggesting this approach with someone with a lower decency quotient – someone more intellectually arrogant. Someone who's more of a 'knower' than a 'learner'.*

TEACHER: *That's really very nice of you to say. Thank you.
That's a really powerful thing – thinking of humility as an intellectual way of being. It really resonates ... I'm not going to forget it in a hurry. I can see how if I bring that to this process, I will naturally bring a learning disposition. I think I'm getting it!*

APPRAISER: *Ok. The last thing. I think appraisal this year for you is about figuring out a puzzle. Do you like puzzles?*

TEACHER: *Sometimes. All depends on their level of difficulty.*

APPRAISER: *It's got some stretch, but you have all year to work it out. Are you up for it?*

TEACHER: *I think so – tell me what it is, and I'll let you know.*

APPRAISER: *I'm going to let you know what I'd like you to do. Then it would be great if you could sit on it for a day or two and come back to me with your thoughts. You need to own this, and you need to say 'no' if it's not for you. Ok?*

TEACHER: *Ok.*

APPRAISER: *Let's start at the end. At the end of the year I'd love you to sit down with me and summarise how you believe you have improved and grown your teaching practice this year. It's your pedagogy I'm asking you to inquire into.*

TEACHER: *Ok that's a new angle.*

I've always focused on things like assessment or curriculum. If I think about it over the last 3 years, we've done inquiries on boys' writing, maths and then there was that assessment inquiry looking at data.

APPRAISER: *Yes, this is true. But those inquiries focused on 'things' as opposed to how you teach.*

We think how we teach is more important than what we teach and from our learners' perspectives we believe they will gain more if we made this shift. I guess there's some recognition from us that maybe in the past we haven't entirely got everything right ... there you go. There's some intellectual humility for you.

TEACHER: *No. No need to apologise. I can see what you're saying. It makes perfect sense.*

APPRAISER: *Ok that's good. It made more sense to us too when we really gave it some thought. For all the effort people were putting into their inquiries we just thought something was missing in action ... and we realised it was the pedagogical component.*

So, what it means is that it would be really good if you could bring analysis, critique and some evidence for statements you might make. In short, it would be a conversation demonstrating that you had been thinking critically about your teaching throughout the year.

It would be great to hear your voice focusing on your learning. Not technical learning for example about the PD you've done this year. I will already know what PD you've done anyway. But deeper learning. How your thinking may have changed. How maybe your beliefs and assumptions have shifted. What you have you learned from your failures and your contributions to them. How you applied PD within your teaching practice and whether it made a difference and what you learned through that process. Those sorts of things.

But there are a couple of rules.

You need to bring some sort of evidence to support any statements you make. As professionals we need to be evidence based.

The second rule is the challenging one. It would be really good to hear your story with evidence but not using student achievement data.

- TEACHER:** *Not student achievement data? That's weird! That's the thing we always focus on throughout the year! I'm not sure I understand your thinking there.*
- APPRAISER:** *Yes, it's a bit of a contradiction isn't it! But let me explain.*
Firstly, I'll know all about the student achievement data before we meet. So, there's no point talking about it if we've already talked about before. As you say, we focus on it all year. Remember this is about your learning - not your learners' learning. I want to hear your voice as a learner. Not you as the teacher.
Then there's John Hattie's research. He suggests around 30% of your teaching practice is reflected in student outcomes. That's a lot but still there's around 70% you can't control. I think it would be unfair to expect you to use student achievement data because it's likely not to show how much you have learned and changed your practice.
Lastly, some students attend after school tutorials and receive additional coaching. This means student achievement again doesn't always reflect your learning.
Does that make sense?
- TEACHER:** *When you explain it like that it makes perfect sense. But it's going to take me a while for it to sink in because in my experience all we've ever focused on is student achievement data – in every school I've taught in.*
If I can keep thinking of myself as the learner through this process as opposed to thinking about my students' learning I think I'll be ok. It's a big shift in thinking.
- APPRAISER:** *I know but remember I believe you're in that green zone and we need to think how we can ensure you stay in it and move further into it.*
This is the best way and I know you can do it. It's also a big shift for me too so I hope you can forgive me in advance if I get a few things wrong.
- TEACHER:** *A couple of minutes ago you said we both had to be learners and that requires us to be vulnerable. If I see you making yourself vulnerable and getting things wrong that fills me with confidence that I can too.*
- APPRAISER:** *That helps me a lot too. Thanks.*
I'm not too sure if there's too much more to discuss for now. As I said, I'd like you to go away for a day or two and think about this and then let me know your thoughts.
If you're happy to go ahead, we can then work through what the next 8 weeks might look like – I've got some ideas I would like to share around how you can design your inquiry.
Just to give you the heads up too – your approach will be different from some of our other colleagues because they're in different zones – more yellow, or red, or more green than you.
So, don't make the mistake of comparing your approach with theirs and think you're not doing it right.
Do you have any questions?
- TEACHER:** *No. No questions. Just thoughts.*
You've really challenged my thinking, and I must admit, I would never have envisaged appraisal as self-appraisal or me managing my own performance. But what I'm getting an inkling of is that what we're asking our kids to do is what we're going to try and do this year around my learning ...like a

21st century pedagogy but for teachers. And I like that because it's hard to ask our students to do something we're unable or unwilling to do ourselves.

I really like it actually because there's a moral purpose to it when I think about it.

Ok, it sounds like we're done for now. I'll give it some more thinking and I'm sure I'll have a few questions when we next catch up.

APPRAISER: *No problem – I look forward to hearing what they are. You go home and have a good evening. It's been a long day.*

TEACHER: *You too. See you tomorrow.*