

Healthy Relationships: The Foundation of a Positive School Climate

An interview with Megan Tschannen-Moran

Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran, a dynamic thinker and exciting voice in education, inspired and challenged participants at the 2013 Ontario Leadership Congress held in April. In her keynote address she made a powerful case for trust as the underpinning of successful leadership influence. To follow up, we were privileged to be able to interview her for this issue of *In Conversation*.

At first glance, her areas of focus – trust and self-efficacy – may appear to be more on the “soft” side of educational leadership: important to have, but surely not at the core of the leadership role. On the contrary, she very convincingly shows us that educational leaders can accomplish very little in the absence of trust. In fact, she illustrates how trust is often the key missing ingredient when not only students but also teachers and even leaders fail to engage in the learning process.

In her view, genuine learning can only take place when we collectively accept that learning is not about knowing all the right answers but about struggling together to find them, without being intimidated by the mistakes that are inevitably made along the way. Trust is the key ingredient that makes it possible for us to do that well and to celebrate mistakes, not as failures, but as opportunities for real learning.

In my professional experience, this kind of high trust among groups of people who are working together is a rare commodity. It takes real leadership to bring people out of a natural, self-protective mode and into a stance

that supports working in a truly collaborative, supportive and accepting environment. Therefore, I think we would do well to think about the business of trust, not only in the classroom, but also at every level of our school systems.

At the school level, of course, Dr. Tschannen-Moran’s work is very much aligned with our own core priorities in Ontario, particularly as we focus on building and maintaining “caring, safe, inclusive and accepting” schools and a “positive school climate” as a means of directly supporting student achievement. Her work also enriches our understanding of how “building relationships and developing people,” such a vital and important domain of leadership, is reflected in the Ontario Leadership Framework.

Dr. Tschannen-Moran’s integrity and authenticity came through at the congress, as they do here, in this conversation. She is on a learning journey, as we all are, and she shares her stories and lessons learned with great passion and urgency. I hope that this issue of *In Conversation* will strengthen and propel forward our collective vision of trust as a key driver of organizational and educational success and that her insights will inform your own leadership practices, as they have mine.

George Zegarac
Deputy Minister of Education



ABOUT DR. MEGAN TSCHANNEN-MORAN

Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran is a professor of educational leadership at the College of William & Mary School of Education in Williamsburg, Virginia. She prepares prospective school leaders for K-12 building-level and central office positions in the Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership Program.

Prior to earning her doctorate at The Ohio State University in 1998, Megan was the founder and principal of the Good News Educational Workshop, a non-public school serving primarily low-income students on the north side of Chicago from 1979 to 1993.

Her research focuses on relationships of trust in school settings and how these relationships are related to important outcomes such as the collective-efficacy beliefs of a school staff, teacher professionalism, and student achievement. Another line of research examines teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and the relationship between those beliefs and teacher behaviour and student outcomes.

Megan has published more than 40 scholarly articles and book chapters in highly-regarded journals such as the *Education Administration Quarterly*, the *Journal of Educational Administration*, and *Teachers College Record*. Her book *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools* (2004, Jossey-Bass) reports the experience of three principals and the consequences of their successes and failures to build trust. Her second book, *Evocative Coaching: Transforming Schools One Conversation at a Time* (2010, Jossey-Bass) co-authored with her husband Bob who is a professional life and leadership coach, presents a model for supporting professional learning for educators that focuses on people's individual strengths.

TRUST: THE INVISIBLE UNDERPINNING OF COLLABORATION AND LEARNING

Your work, while diverse, has consistently focused on the importance of human relationships as the underpinning of a positive school climate. I'd like to touch on a number of your areas of interest within that broader theme, perhaps beginning with trust, which you have explored in considerable depth. What is trust and why does it matter?

Well, let me start with why trust matters, because that was an insight that I had early in my doctoral work. After graduating from college, I had established and led a small school in Chicago where it was primarily our strong sense of community that held things together. Our little school was located in a low-income community and operated on a shoestring budget, and yet students and staff alike flourished there.

It was with this experience in mind that I went on to do my graduate work at the Ohio State University in search of what it was that was so magical about this little school in Chicago. I wanted to find the words to describe it and I wanted to study it so that we could build on what was learned in ways that would benefit other schools.

In 'The Conceptualization and Measurement of Faculty Trust in Schools: The Omnibus T-Scale,' Tschannen-Moran with Wayne Hoy (2003) conceptualizes "the many faces of trust," presents a working definition of trust, and develops a short, valid and reliable measure of faculty trust for use in both elementary and secondary schools they refer to as the Omnibus T-Scale.

The first big concept I encountered in graduate school was that of school climate, in a course taught by Wayne Hoy, one of the preeminent scholars in educational administration, who had been researching the idea of school climate and its impact

on educational outcomes for many years. I was excited about that idea as a way to capture some of what we had in Chicago that was working so well.

I began working as Wayne Hoy's research assistant and his first assignment was for me to study something I'd never heard of, "teacher self-efficacy." Ultimately, I got very invested in that concept and I thought, "Yes, that's another part of what made my little school work." That was some of the magic that got people, who were being paid almost nothing, to show up every day, to work hard, to invest themselves so deeply, and to be so motivated to persist through really challenging circumstances.

But when the time came to do my doctoral dissertation I thought, "There's something more to what made my little school work. There is something more that nobody's really talking about in the research of schools." That something more was trust; we had a high level of trust among the staff, students, and parents.

At the time, as I was getting started, there was almost no research in the area of trust within the realm of education. There had been some work done, but it had fallen away and no one was picking up on it. What's interesting is that research on trust tends to show up in places where people are struggling with not having trust. In her collection of essays about ethics, the philosopher Annette Baier wrote that we inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted.

In Annette Baier's widely discussed 'Trust and Antitrust' (*Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*, 1986) she observed that moral and political philosophers, from the ancients to contemporaries, have said relatively little about trust and notes that this is surprising given the centrality of trust to so many kinds of social interactions.

I also noticed that trust was showing up in the research literature in different fields of study at points where there was a lack of trust. So it became clear to me that it was the lack of trust that got people's attention. That's why people started to become curious about trust and wanted to study and understand it.

Empirical research into trust actually started in the late 1950s as a product of the escalating suspicion of the Cold War. Then, in the late 1960s, psychologists became curious about young people and their disillusionment with institutions and authorities of society, including anyone over thirty. In the early 1980s, research on trust turned to interpersonal relationships in response to soaring divorce rates, radical changes in family structures, and the impact of the women's movement. Then, in the 1990s, with shifts in technology and society, trust emerged again as a subject of study in sociology and in organizational science. This was particularly true in the business sector because all the downsizing that was taking place at that time was damaging trust in organizations. And they were paying a price for it.

So I started to focus on trust right at a moment when trust unfortunately was in decline at all levels of society and when diminished trust had also started to affect schools. We noticed that schools weren't being afforded the same high level of trust from parents in their communities, the "taken-for-granted" trust that schools had once enjoyed. And with the increasing pressures of accountability, trust inside the walls of schools became more challenging as well.

Now, as we think about schools in the 21st century, we understand even more powerfully the importance of trust. We have to get smarter about what trust is and how we foster it, how to maintain it, how to intervene when trust has been damaged, and how to restore trust if we have lost it.

In *Trust Matters: Leadership for Successful Schools*, Tschannen-Moran (2009) offers practical, hands-on advice to educators on how to establish and maintain trust in schools, as well as how to repair trust that has been damaged. The book centres on the case studies of three principals, one who has succeeded in cultivating the trust of faculty and two who, although well-intentioned, have been unsuccessful in harnessing the vital resource of trust and whose schools are suffering impaired effectiveness as a result. It also explores the role of the school leader in fostering trust relationships among teachers, students, and parents.

So in a school context, what does it look like when trust is scarce? What barriers can this create?

Well, one of the things that happens when trust has been damaged, or trust is low, is that people's energy gets siphoned off from their primary, collective work. People pull back and their energy is invested in self-protection and in hyper-vigilance. They begin to look over their shoulders, always watching out for the distrusted person, especially if this person has authority in a leadership role and who has the power to discipline or do them harm.

At these points, people tend to spend a lot of their energy focusing on the source of their distrust. "What's she up to?" "What's he going to do next?" "What recourse do I have if that happens?" And so it's a kind of cognitive processing around anticipating future harm as well as bonding together with other people to process the emotional woundedness around that harm. That processing can take up a lot of people's time and attention and, of course, all of that energy is taken away from the important, collective work of investing their time and energy in student learning.

Uncovering myths about trust from *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, Covey (2006)

Myth	Reality
Trust is soft.	Trust is hard, real, and quantifiable.
Trust is slow.	Nothing is as fast as the speed of trust.
Trust is built solely on integrity.	Trust is a function of both character (which includes integrity) and competence.
You either have trust or you don't.	Trust can be both created and destroyed.
Once lost, trust cannot be restored.	Though difficult, in most cases lost trust can be restored.
You can't teach trust.	Trust can be effectively taught and learned, and it can become a leverageable, strategic advantage.
Trusting people is too risky.	Not trusting people is a greater risk.
Trust is established one person at a time.	Establishing trust with the one establishes trust with the many.

So, as you alluded to earlier, in a climate of trust, those issues would disappear. The trust would be invisible, in a sense, but it would be supporting you.

That's right. *Of course* I can trust my colleagues, *of course* they're honest, and *of course* they're going to do what they say they're going to do. Why would I spend time even questioning such things if I don't have reason to do so?

One of the big surprises in the literature on trust is that researchers assumed that trust is hard to develop early in a relationship; that you have to work actively at it or you aren't going to get trust. But they were surprised to find out that's not the case. It turns out that, in the absence of any warning signs or red flags, people pretty readily extend provisional trust because trust is the easier option. All the watchfulness and wariness of distrust really takes a lot of energy. So people would rather extend a measure of trust to someone until they have reason to put up their guard. To work in an environment of distrust, where people feel they have to be always looking over their shoulders is really an uncomfortable place to work.

Do researchers dissect trust in any specific way that we need to know about, or are we talking here about simple, everyday trust?

Well, researchers do slice and dice trust in different contexts and call it by different names. But really, I think trust, at the core, is a sense of confidence in other people that allows you to let down your guard, to be in an interdependent relationship with them with a sense of ease and calm. If we're not in an interdependent relationship that makes us vulnerable to the other person, then trust really isn't relevant – it doesn't matter whether we trust the other person or not. We pass people on the sidewalk every day, but since we're not interconnected or interdependent with them, and since our outcomes are not tied up with their behaviour, we're not very concerned about trust.

But as soon as we are in an interdependent relationship with someone and as soon as we are trying to accomplish something that requires their cooperation, trust becomes an issue and the dynamics of the relationship change. When it's

something that we care deeply about, like educating hundreds or thousands of children to high levels of achievement and well-being, and we cannot accomplish the outcomes we care about without the involvement of other people, then those are the times when it matters. It matters a great deal, whether we trust them or not.

And how do we decide to trust someone?

Well, that's the complicated part, how we make those judgements. Can I trust this person or not? To answer this question it becomes important to understand what we're talking about and initially I found almost as many definitions of trust as there were researchers studying trust! That's because trust is multifaceted and people make many simultaneous judgements about the people with whom they're interacting as they decide whether or not to extend their trust to them and to lower their guard.

We all do this. And we make those judgments regarding someone's trustworthiness based on our assessment, first, as to whether or not the other person is benevolent; in other words, whether or not there's a sense of mutual good will: "I've got your back, you've got mine." When that stance is solid, we are confident that the other person wouldn't even consider getting ahead if it were to come at my expense because there's a mutual sense of care and concern.

Also, we focus on whether or not we deem the other person to be a person of integrity, someone who aligns their talk and their walk. In addition, we pay attention to whether or not they are competent to provide what we need, to provide reliably what we are counting on, without hiding or withholding anything that might hurt us.

Trust is one's willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open.

BENEVOLENCE: confidence that one's well-being will be protected by the trusted party

RELIABILITY: the extent to which one can count on another person or group

COMPETENCY: the extent to which the trusted party has knowledge and skill

HONESTY: the character, integrity, and authenticity of the trusted party

OPENNESS: the extent to which there is no withholding of information from others

From 'The Conceptualization and Measurement of Faculty Trust in Schools: The Omnibus T-Scale,' (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 2003)

TRUSTWORTHY LEADERSHIP: BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

In your work on trust you've categorized the leadership styles of principals: the keep-the-peace principal, the overzealous performer, and the transformational principal. What led you to those categories and how do they relate to the ways in which leaders build trust?

Well, early leadership studies conceived of leadership along a single continuum, from a relationship-oriented leader to a task-oriented leader. But studies done on leadership at the Ohio State University in the 1940s and Michigan State in the 1950s contradicted that. What they discovered was that there are actually two continuums. Leaders could be high or low on the relationship dimension and they could be high or low on the task dimension. So that understanding set up a two-by-two framework.

The two dimensions of leadership, when placed on a perpendicular axis, define four leadership styles: a leader who is high on the task dimension of initiating structure and low on the relationship dimension of consideration, a leader who is high on the relationship dimension and low on task structure, a leader who is low on both dimensions or a leader who is high on both. Later, leadership theories suggested that the effectiveness of each of these leadership styles was contingent upon contextual factors.

From *Educational Administration: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 8th edition (Hoy and Miskel, 2008).

As I was analyzing my data, and writing about the principals I had studied, I realized that they fit this model of trust. Among the three principals, two were low on trust, while the third had successfully built a high-trust school. One of the low-trust leaders was very committed to the task but not good at building relationships. I called her the overzealous performer. She came in determined to turn around this underperforming school. She meant well and she really wanted the best for the kids in that school, but she didn't take stock of the importance of having the trust of her staff. She did a number of things that broke trust with the staff and, essentially, forgot that she needed the support of her teachers to in order to enact her policies and get the school moving in the right direction. Once the teachers were no longer on her side and were motivated to resist her efforts there was no way for her to be successful.

The other low-trust principal I studied was all about relationships. He was a pleasant guy; everybody liked him, and he wanted to be liked by everybody. But he really didn't have the competence needed to deal with conflict effectively and so he avoided conflict like the plague. He backed away from it at every turn. As a result, conflict ran rampant in his school. What's interesting in this case is that although he was well-liked as a person he was not trusted as a leader, because he sacrificed the important task of fostering student achievement in favour of avoiding conflict.

The third principal, the one who was successful at building trust, managed to balance an orientation toward the task with an orientation toward relationships.

That's how these profiles began to emerge in my research and led to some rich descriptions of the leadership styles of principals in relation to building trust in school environments.

Among the findings reported in 'Why Teachers Trust School Leaders,' Handford and Leithwood (2013) confirm earlier evidence about the salience for teachers of leader trustworthiness in thinking about their work and addressing the challenges they face in improving their practices. Results also provide additional support for something comparable to the "big five personality traits" of successful leaders; that is, the "big five characteristics of trustworthy leaders" – competence, consistency and reliability, openness, respect, and integrity.

Given those insights, what advice do you have regarding trust building for a principal who is new to a school?

This is a very important question. I hope that one of the consequences of my work is that people recognize the importance of building trust right from the outset of coming into a new setting. It's in the first weeks and months of a leader's arrival in a school that the staff are very attentive to and observant about the new leader. That's when people are making up their minds: "Is this someone I need to be on guard with or can I lower my guard and extend trust to this person?" So, there is a window of opportunity that closes if a leader is too impatient to push for change before building relationships.

Leaders are particularly prone to this temptation because they hold power in organizations and think that effecting change is their responsibility. They understand this requires that they not only motivate people to work hard and well together but that they also achieve certain educational outcomes for students. Staff are watching very carefully because the leader's behaviour and orientation can have such a major impact on the quality of their professional lives and their sense of well-being.

And that is why it's a really important time during those first few months – the courtship period – for a new leader to be mindful of trust, to slow down and take the time to build relationships. It's a time to demonstrate genuine caring and a sense of benevolence about people as human beings, not just as functionaries in the organization.

It's also an important time for leaders to demonstrate integrity, to show that their walk matches their talk, to be reliable, and to make sure that they follow up on the things they say they will do. It helps for leaders to be open with information and to set up structures for shared decision making, if those structures don't already exist.

To build trust, leaders need to practice authentic shared decision-making. Too often, shared decision making is done in an insincere way. It is a game that leaders play to make people believe they're going to have a say in decisions that, in fact, have already been made. Educators see through this guise and it undermines trust.

In 'School Climate: The Interplay between Interpersonal Relationships and Student Achievement' Tschannen-Moran, Parish, and DiPaola (2006), provide data to support the notion that overall school climate as well as specific dimensions of school climate can affect student achievement.

When decision-making is shared authentically, however, principals demonstrate trust in the professional expertise of their teachers and through genuine listening to their teachers, who are closest to the action in the classroom, actually results in higher-quality decisions.

Finally, it is so important for leaders to demonstrate optimism that things can work and to focus on the strengths of individuals as well as the collective. It's important in those first few months to say out loud what your intentions are, to be explicit about setting the norms collectively about the quality of relationships people want in the school, and then to follow up consistently when those norms are broken.

In *The Ontario Leadership Framework 2012 with a Discussion of the Research Foundations*, Leithwood (2012) stresses the importance of getting the right balance: "Shared leadership makes important contributions to organizational improvement but successful forms of such leadership depend on the active engagement of those in positions of formal authority."

The Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) describes Personal Leadership Resources (PLRs) which are characteristics of effective leaders that the research indicates create the variation among leaders in how well they are able to enact leadership practices. The three categories of PLRs are cognitive, social and psychological. The psychological category includes optimism, resilience, self-efficacy and proactivity. The OLF and related resource documents are available at www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/content/home.

What can you tell us about trust between students and teachers?

Well, this is a growing area of interest for me and there was almost no research on this just a decade ago. But my own studies have found that this is where we get the greatest impact in terms of how and where trust influences student achievement. In fact it's one of the few variables that educational researchers have found that outstrips socioeconomic status as a predictor of student achievement.

So it is crucially important that we build a positive school climate in which trust is cultivated between teachers and students. That's because, in the same way that teachers will invest their energies in self-protection in a low-trust work environment, students will do the same in the classroom. If they don't feel safe and if they don't feel that they can trust their teachers or the classmates around them, their energies are going to be taken up with self-

preservation and concern and worry about what might happen. What's going on? How can I protect myself? What's my recourse? All of this worry takes away from the energy that should be invested in learning.

And let's face it; learning really is a risky business. By that I mean genuine learning. You have to try things you don't know how to do, and to do that in a public space is to risk humiliation. You may not get it right the first time. There may be some errors involved in the learning process. And in the absence of trust you may be unwilling to take the risks that genuine learning entails.

The 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) sought to find out whether 15-year-olds feel that what they have learned in schools is useful for them, both in the immediate term and for their future. Among the findings are the following:

- Most students think that what they learned in school is useful.
- Students who think school is useful tend to be high performers and tend to have good relations with their teachers and study in classes that are conducive to learning.
- Students' attitudes towards schooling are only weakly related to their own backgrounds or to the types of schools they attend.

The bottom line: Students' attitudes towards schooling and their reading performance are mutually reinforcing, as are their attitudes towards schooling and the atmosphere in the classroom.

'What Do Students Think About School?' (*PISA in FOCUS* #24, 2013)

Educators play an important role in promoting children and youth's well-being by creating, fostering, and sustaining a learning environment that is healthy, caring, safe, inclusive, and accepting. A learning environment of this kind will support not only students' cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development but also their mental health, their resilience, and their overall state of well-being. All this will help them achieve their full potential in school and in life.

From *The Ontario Curriculum, Social Studies, Grades 1-6; History and Geography, Grades 7-8* (revised, 2013)

The 'Dynamics of Human Relationships' course focuses on helping students understand the individual and group factors that contribute to healthy relationships. Students examine the connections between their own self-concept and their interpersonal relationships. They learn and practise strategies for developing and maintaining healthy relationships with friends, family, and community members, as well as with partners in intimate relationships.

From *The Ontario Curriculum, Social Sciences and Humanities, Grades 9-12: (revised, 2013)*

What about building trust with parents?

Well, again, this is where that courtship period comes into play very strongly. School leaders have an opportunity early in their arrival at a new school to demonstrate their benevolence, to demonstrate to parents that they really care about their kids, that they share a mutual investment in their well-being, and that they're not going to play games. Leaders put themselves on solid ground with parents when they make it clear that they're going to be open and honest with them and that they're not going to try to hide what's going on, even when the news may be hard to hear. So taking the time to communicate this early in relationships, and to explicitly establish trust, is very important when it comes to the connection between school leaders and parents.

Then, of course, school leaders have to keep that up and follow through. But early on in the relationship is a particularly important time to signal that I, as a leader, and we, as a school community, are people parents can trust. It's important to remember that parents feel very vulnerable about the well-being of their children and that giving their children over to schools means they're putting the very thing that matters most in their lives – their children – into the hands of other people. Their ability to trust us is really, really vital.

“In a caring school community, participants work continually to improve the nature and effects of partnerships. Although the interactions of educators, parents, students, and community members will not always be smooth or successful, partnership programs establish a base of respect and trust on which to build.”

Good partnerships:

- withstand questions, conflicts, debates, and disagreements;
- provide structures and processes to solve problems; and
- are maintained – even strengthened – after differences have been resolved.

Without this firm base disagreements and problems that are sure to arise about schools and students will be harder to solve.”

From 'Caring Connections' (Epstein, Kappan, 2010)

Presumably that trust can also be easily damaged.

Yes, I think one area where that tends to happen frequently is around discipline. And I think this is partly where schools get into difficulties when we have disciplinary codes that are very punitive in nature rather than instructional. We think we're going to really reform disruptive kids by inflicting some painful or distasteful consequence upon them, such as removing them from their peers or otherwise setting them apart, by suspending or expelling them, and that this is going to teach them a lesson. But it seldom does.

And from where parents sit, I think, many times these actions communicate a lack of caring. On the educators' side, these actions may be seen as a form of caring: we want to teach this child a lesson that will serve them well as to how to behave in ways that are acceptable in society. So I think the intentions are good on the educators' side but I think we have not been guided by the right theories. I think our discipline policies have been undergirded by Freudian psychology and behaviourism whereas attachment theory, which is grounded in issues of trust, would be a better and more productive theory to guide us as we try to assist young people to adapt their behaviour to conform to our expectations.

In the Ontario context, “The Ministry of Education is committed to supporting boards in building and sustaining a positive school climate that is safe, inclusive, and accepting for all students in order to support their education so that all students reach their full potential. A progressive discipline approach combines prevention and intervention strategies and discipline with opportunities for students to continue their education.”

From 'Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Student Behaviour' (*Policy/Program Memorandum No. 145, 2012*)

COLLABORATION AND COACHING: BUILDING ON STRENGTHS

Another aspect of your work revolves around building a positive school climate through a strengths-based approach which you've referred to as Appreciative Inquiry or "AI." Can you tell us about that?

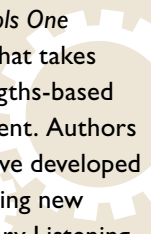
Well, AI or “Appreciative Inquiry” grew out of action research and it builds on the profound yet really obvious insight that people become a lot more engaged and stay a lot more invested and motivated when they identify and build on what's working well rather than when they focus on identifying and fixing what's going wrong.

who is being coached. That's really the stance of all educators. So we want to remind ourselves as leaders and as coaches that our purpose here is to inspire the person that we're working with to be invested in their own ongoing learning, so that they are not creating a dependency relationship with us but, rather, we are inviting them to become newly invested in their own professional learning. And our method for doing that focuses more on asking than on telling; we hope to evoke the motivation, the method, and the means for change.

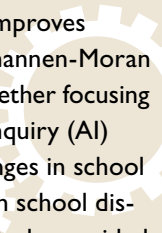
Inevitably, telling people that they should change something – even if we're giving them good ideas and our intention is to be helpful – gets their back up. There's just something in human nature that reacts like that. There's an expression that says “you insist, I resist” and the concept behind evocative coaching is as simple as that. We seek to minimize resistance by taking a different stance.

That stance is one of empathy and inquiry. We seek to understand the feelings and needs that are at play and to appreciate the strengths and possibilities for moving things forward in positive directions. Evocative coaches may brainstorm ideas with someone they are working with, but that happens only after a situation is appreciated fully and only when the sharing of ideas can be received joyfully. That's easier to do when coaching conversations start by looking at someone's strengths and what's going well in their current practice. That's not to say that we put on blinders or “rose-coloured” glasses when it comes to problems. We definitely want to raise awareness in people about all aspects of their own professional practices. We even seek to gather and use data so that they see their practices in a new light.

But we take a strengths-based approach even here, with the data, because we don't want to generate defensiveness. We want the data, and the conversation about the data, to evoke new insights about what is going on now as well as new approaches as to where to go in the future. Where do you want to build on this? How do you want to grow and go forward given these things that you're doing so well? What more do you want to do now? These are the kinds of questions that open up people and help them to get invested in moving forward.



Evocative Coaching: Transforming Schools One Conversation at a Time is a resource that takes a teacher-centred no-fault and strengths-based approach to performance improvement. Authors Bob and Megan Tschannen-Moran have developed a simple yet profound way of facilitating new conversations in schools through Story Listening, Expressing Empathy, Appreciative Inquiry, and Design Thinking.



In ‘Taking a Strengths-Based Focus Improves School Climate’ Megan and Bob Tschannen-Moran (2011) undertook a study to learn whether focusing on strengths through Appreciative Inquiry (AI) would be related to measurable changes in school climate and trust within a small urban school district. The authors report that “the study provided evidence of how AI gave one downtrodden school system and community new reason to hope for better days and to invest in bringing those hopes to fruition. By celebrating the best of the present, district participants were able to dream even brighter dreams for the future.”

Another piece of this, which is also designed to prevent people from being defensive or playing it too safe in terms of their professional learning, is that we prefer the language of “designing experiments” rather than “setting goals.” Instead of setting “smart goals,” we design “smart experiments.” We like that language because the only way to fail at an experiment is to not conduct it at all. As long as you reflect on an experiment, you will always learn something from it that can be carried forward to the next experiment. It's a process of continuous learning, growth, and change.

So we try to take the fear-of-failure out of the coaching dynamic. I mentioned earlier about the importance of creating safe learning environments for students so that they can take the risks that learning entails. Well, we need to create those same, safe environments for our teachers if we also want them to continue to grow and learn in their work.

You also stress the importance of empathy in your approach.

Yes, the work of coaching really does need to be grounded in a very clear sense of empathy. I really enjoyed reading the Ontario Leadership Framework, partly because it, too, talked about trust as well as about empathy. But I think we have too often let those be fuzzy concepts, kind of feel-good concepts, without a lot of clarity about what they are, and without a lot of skill-building on how to use them well as educational leaders.

“...recent evidence continues to link leader effectiveness to perceptions of leader empathy on the part of colleagues, building on Daniel Goleman’s claim that empathy “represents the foundation skill for all social competencies important for work.” These relationship-oriented behaviours also include demonstrations of trust and confidence, keeping colleagues informed, and showing appreciation for their ideas and recognition of their accomplishments.”

From *The Ontario Leadership Framework 2012 with a Discussion of the Research Foundations*, Leithwood (2012)

Empathy is a respectful understanding of another person’s experience. It’s not sympathy, which is emotional contagion – that’s joining them in their outrage, their upset, their frantic worry, or whatever they might be feeling in the moment. You know, getting caught up in what’s going on with them emotionally. Empathy is not that; it is a much more cognitive and deliberative process. It comes from understanding that as human beings we have universal human needs that guide and direct our behaviour. All of our behaviour is motivated around trying to satisfy one or more of these universal needs that are important to us in the moment. Once we understand what those needs are or might be, and once we accept that people are always trying to meet those needs to the best of their ability, then the edge of judgement drops out of the equation.

That view opens up the possibility of empathy, even if we strongly disapprove of the strategy the other person is using to attempt to meet those needs.

It cuts out the judgmental stance. We can bring empathy and respectful understanding of what they’re doing because we recognize – okay, they’re trying to meet a need that we all have. And if they’re doing it in ineffective ways, we can have some compassion for that because it’s not likely working very well for them.

Take for example, people who ask for support or cooperation in a very negative and confrontative way. You understand what they are after but if that’s the best way they have of asking for support, they’re probably not going to get a whole lot of help and cooperation. And that’s going to leave them without the very support they are seeking. So instead of judging them, we might help them think about other ways to ask for help that might be more effective.

“People who have the opportunity every day to do what they do best – to act on their strengths – are far more likely to flourish. Strengths are highly individual, varying from person to person. Some strengths define the contributions you’re most poised to make in life. Others are psychological and when taken in combination, define the unique impact and contribution you might make in life as a whole. Research has shown that learning about your strengths can give you a high.”

From *Positivity* (Fredrickson, 2009)

For more on Fredrickson’s (2013) current research see *Love 2.0: How Our Supreme Emotion Affects Everything We Feel, Think, Do, and Become*.

In *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work*, Amabile and Kramer (2012) show that when people found someone reaching out to offer them “nourishers” their inner work lives blossomed – which increased the odds that they would make progress at work. These researchers divide the “nourishment” factor into four broad categories of events: respect, encouragement, emotional support and affiliation.

COACHING AND EVALUATION: MAINTAINING A BALANCE

In many cases, someone who is coaching others may also have the role of evaluating them. How do you play those two roles, and keep them in balance?

Well, first I'll acknowledge that this is a genuine and ongoing challenge. It's not easy to balance these two roles. Trying to hold them in balance can work against the effectiveness of each. It can create problems, for example, to be in an evaluative role if we hope to coach someone because evaluation creates a disincentive for somebody to want to share their struggles.

One of my students worked in a school for children with emotional behaviour disorders in his first year of teaching. That's a really challenging place to start a teaching career, and he struggled. He went to his school administrator to ask for some help and support in handling a particular situation. He was surprised, then, when he received his evaluation later on in that year because it listed, almost word for word, the concerns he had raised when he had been asking for support. I think that story shows vividly how the two roles can, and often do, get in the way of each other.

What we need to understand and be able to articulate to the teachers we supervise is that evaluation is a critical function in all organizations. It serves an important purpose in schools because, as educators, we're not the ones who pay the bills for our work. We owe it to the people who are paying the bills to be able to assure them that we are doing our jobs and doing them to an adequate standard of quality.

So that kind of evaluation and measurement matters, but evaluation is not enough to help teachers grow and keep them in a process of continual professional learning. We also need to create, then, a context where we can engage in shared dialogue with teachers about what's next, what's new, and how are we going to keep moving

forward. We need, in other words, to make coaching and disciplined professional inquiry a part of our school culture.

If one and the same person is charged with both the coaching and evaluation roles, then we need to be explicit as to when we're doing what; when we're wearing which hat. "Here's the time of year that I'm doing my evaluation, here's the form I'm going to be using, and here are the criteria." It helps when schools have a clear rubric that identifies what the highest level of performance looks like and what adequate performance looks like because then the need for improvement can be described clearly and is not personalized. One way to start the conversation is by inviting a teacher to self-assess using the same rubric. Once the evaluation conversation is completed we can explicitly set that aside and say, "OK, now I'm here to assist you in any way I can to develop even better methods and to operate at even higher levels. So where is it that you want to go next professionally, and how would you like me to be involved?"

"A common mistake is to link evaluation and coaching as cause and effect. At their best, evaluation and coaching proceed on separate but complementary tracks." Read more about what makes for "coaching success" in 'The Coach and the Evaluator' (Bob and Megan Tschannen-Moran, 2011).

What coaching needs to be: "Research into adult learning, growth-fostering relationships, and cognitive- behavioural neuroscience points to three principles that are crucial to successful coaching:

- It must be teacher-centered: teacher-centered is different from coach-centered.
- It must be no-fault: no-fault is different from high-stakes.
- It must be strengths-based: strengths-based is different from deficit-based."

From 'The Coach and the Evaluator' (Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran, 2011)

To sum up, it seems clear that your work emphasizes that healthy relationships are fundamental to creating positive school climates.

Absolutely! You know, when I'm invited to work with schools, I don't often get invited to work with happy schools. If people are going to invite me to come in and try to help them, it's usually because trust has broken down, they're really having a problem, and it's an unhappy place.

“The school climate may be defined as the learning environment and relationships found within a school and school community. A positive school climate exists when all members of the school community feel safe, included, and accepted, and actively promote positive behaviours and interactions.

Principles of equity and inclusive education are embedded in the learning environment to support a positive school climate and a culture of mutual respect. A positive school climate is a crucial component of bullying prevention.”

From PPM 144 – Bullying Prevention and Intervention posted at: <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/144.pdf> and PPM 145 – Progressive Discipline and Promoting Positive Behaviour posted at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/145.pdf>

And so, very often when I show up, people are sitting back with their arms crossed, you see the disengagement just in the way they are holding their bodies. The general demeanour tells you everything. There's not a lot of laughter, people are pulled back into themselves, and people are often fragmented into small groups where they've essentially banded together against a common enemy.

My best advice for anyone in a situation like this is to take a strengths-based approach and avoid getting caught up in the blame-game. We've seen measureable growth, in some instances a whole standard deviation improvement in school climate over a two-year period, just because we shifted toward strengths. So building dialogue and relationships around that strength-based focus is a very powerful strategy that I believe will move us forward.

‘Promoting a Positive School Climate,’ a resource developed by the Ministry of Education <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/climate.html> offers a range of practical suggestions for activities and practices that can be applied to the entire school, the classroom or to students.

