Planning Productive Talk

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Outcome maps enable coaches and supervisors to pinpoint problems in practice and respond with strategies that help.

It's mid-October when Karen walks into Terry's 9th grade social studies classroom for her scheduled coaching conversation. As a new teacher coach, Karen has been working with Terry since school began. She sits in the back and smiles at Terry, who is busy writing on the board. Terry acknowledges her with a nod.

Students file in and begin to sit down, talking about the clubs they've signed up for—and about homecoming, which is just around the corner. Terry keeps writing on the board with her back to the students. When she finishes, she looks down and gathers her papers. When the bell rings for class to begin, she looks up and says with no emotion in her voice, "Let's get going. Take out your binders and write down the homework." After a few minutes, she turns off the lights so students can see her PowerPoint presentation.

During the next 30 minutes, Terry stands in the front of the room looking at the PowerPoint slides, her notes, and the darkened space. She then assigns small-group work and walks around making sure students are on task. Groups quietly work through the assignment. Terry doesn't get down to the students' level when she walks over to a group to answer a question someone has; when students cross the room to ask her for guidance, she sighs and curtly answers their questions. As Terry collects the work at the end of class, she reiterates the homework assignment and reminds students, as they leave their groups, to move the chairs back into their original position. At the end of class, students file out.

Karen thinks to herself, "On the positive side, Terry has things under control. But where's the connection with students? My notes indicate that her talking is limited to giving directions and lecturing. Her lack of personal connection with students is going to be a challenge for her."

Karen and Terry meet during Terry's prep period right after class. Karen starts the conversation by asking Terry how she felt about the lesson. Terry is pleased she got through all her notes and was able to collect the assignment before the bell rang. Karen agrees, saying that Terry really managed the pace and timing of the class. She also mentions that she appreciated the stories Terry told in class because they added life to the lesson. They both acknowledge Terry's strong grasp of the topic.

"It's Monday," Karen adds. "I noticed you didn't ask the kids what they did over the weekend or mention homecoming. That's all they were talking about when they came in." Suddenly defensive, Terry replies, "With so much content to cover, I don't have time to *chat*."

"Ouch," Karen thinks. "What can I say? It isn't about chatting. It's about *connecting*. It's clear that Terry feels stressed, but if I don't say something, her students will feel even more stressed than she does every time they come to class. What can I say that will support both the students and Terry?"

An Outcome Map Can Help

As educators, we have credentials in how to teach students, but we don't have credentials in how to talk effectively with adults. Yet adult-to-adult communication skills matter for student achievement. How can we talk to one another in humane and growth-producing ways?

One of the most effective tools for planning a coaching conversation is an outcome map (see fig. 1).[1] Focusing on six key questions, the map helps users think through the challenges that colleagues might face in their work, envision in detail the behavior the user would like to see a colleague adopt, and offer context-specific supports. It can also be used to clarify a new initiative with a department or school or work on a behavior plan with a student. It can be used as a behind-the-scenes planning tool for a future conversation or a support in real time. The outcome map is a thinking map, a scaffold to make one's thinking about—and thus one's planning toward—a given outcome more productive.

Karen uses the outcome map in two ways. First, she completes it before her conversation with Terry so she's better prepared to suggest specific behaviors that can create more rapport with students. Second, she brings the *structure* of the map—not her filled-out version of it—to the actual conversation. While talking with Terry, she jots down "on the fly" the six areas that the map addresses, with some initial suggestions here and there. Both add their thoughts to the map as they go along, and Terry can take this version home for further reflection.

Let's look at how Karen works through the six questions with Terry.

Question 1: What's the presenting problem?

In responding to this first question, Karen tries to home in on and frame the challenge succinctly: "The presenting problem is Terry's lack of personal connection with students. She doesn't establish a learning environment that's emotionally safe." This statement is Karen's thinking and planning map—she isn't handing this to Terry—and she'll use it to consider the presenting problem in more depth.

Perhaps Karen will discover that the issue isn't really Terry's rapport with students but, instead, might have to do with a departmental rush through curriculum or perceived peer pressure to be more content driven. If so, Karen can rewrite her part of the map. She will also ask Terry about her take on the issue. But for the moment, this is her best point of entry.

Question 2: What's the tentative outcome?

After using her data to define the problem, Karen writes out a tentative outcome. The word *tentative* gives Karen permission to try out an outcome and see whether it makes sense. Answering this question, she writes, "Terry has more of a personal connection with students and creates a positive classroom climate." Although Karen knows it's easy to vent and be frustrated by Terry's behavior, it's far more helpful to think about what the situation would look like if the problem were resolved.

Question 3: What would the outcome look and sound like in practice?

This is where specificity and precision mean everything. Karen begins to focus on what it would look and sound like if Terry routinely made connections with students. She thinks of doable, specific behaviors, such as

- Smiling at students.
- Laughing with students.
- Making eye contact with students.

- Kneeling to be on the same level with students when speaking to them individually or in small groups.

- Sharing appropriate details about her life outside school.

- Acknowledging and celebrating when students participate in activities, such as sports events or school plays.

- Attending school events.

- Asking students about their backgrounds and incorporating that knowledge into lessons.

- Asking students how they see themselves connecting with the material they're studying.

- Acknowledging feelings in the classroom. For example, if students are tense because of an upcoming test, assisting them in managing their anxiety by helping them breathe deeply or articulating positive thoughts about their ability to do well.

Karen focuses on behaviors that Terry can see, hear, and repeat.

Question 4: What knowledge, skills, or dispositions are needed to engage in the desired behaviors?

Answering this question requires the coach to think from Terry's perspective and understand possible obstacles that could keep her from connecting with students. In many cases, the inability to engage in a desired behavior may stem either from not knowing how to do something or from a lack of awareness of how one comes across. Karen asks herself,

- What information, skills, or resources might Terry need to create a connection with students?

- Is Terry clear about the professional standards for creating connections? Does she think she needs to be just a content deliverer? Does she understand that the standards actually require her to also foster students' social and emotional growth and create a safe environment in which to do so?

- Might there be pressure from above that makes Terry feel as though she can't be more herself in class?

- What valuable connection-oriented behaviors would most help Terry? For example, would it be helpful to encourage her to spend the first five minutes of class on Monday checking in with students?

After pondering those questions, Karen writes,

- Terry might need icebreaker ideas for creating a sense of belonging in class.

- She might need permission to take time at the beginning of class to check in with students before jumping into the material.

- She might need strategies to make her feel more comfortable sharing personal information with students.

- She might need strategies that will help her learn about students' lives and incorporate that knowledge into lesson plans.

- She might need more knowledge about nonverbal behaviors and about how to make herself more approachable for students.

With this information in hand, Karen can now be more strategic in her choice of supports.

Question 5: What strategies might promote the specified outcome?

Karen now turns to supports that can help Terry become more connected to her students. She considers the following:

- She could attend a workshop with Terry on creating a positive classroom climate.

- She and Terry could observe in the classroom of a colleague who establishes a warm climate.

- She could videotape one of Terry's lessons and review it with her so Terry could see her nonverbal behaviors and become more aware of how she speaks in class.

- She could suggest specific teacher comments that Karen would be comfortable making that support student connection, such as, "Who's going to the rally this Friday for homecoming? I'm going!" She could fill in a grid during a classroom observation that shows Terry with whom she did and didn't connect.

- She could encourage Terry to do short personal check-ins with students.

- She could work with Terry to clarify which school events Terry might be interested in attending.

- She could create a list of prompts or icebreakers for the beginning of class.

Karen knows that Terry might not use all these strategies, but she will have some ideas in her back pocket. She'll come to the next conversation prepared.

Question 6: What supports does the coach need to implement these strategies?

Karen decides that she needs to find funding so that she and Terry can attend a workshop on positive classroom climate together. She also needs to create a list of teachers who have personal connections with students and who would be open to peer observation. Finally, she needs to locate a video camera.

But external resources aren't the only important ones. Karen must tap into her own internal resources as well. She needs to be more compassionate and remember how hard it is to be a new teacher.

Trusting to Try Something New

After the next coaching observation in which Karen witnessed the same cool behavior on Terry's part, she gently said,

> I noticed you didn't smile much in class, and you didn't bring up next week's homecoming events. The kids may feel you're a little disconnected. They might want a little more "you" to come through in your teaching. Can you see how they might feel that way?

Terry sighed. "With so much content to cover, I just don't have time to bond with students," she admitted. Karen acknowledged the stress that Terry had to deal with, but she also suggested that making connections with students needn't take much time—and that it wouldn't take time away from teaching. "Are you open to a quick suggestion or two?" asked Karen. Terry shrugged. "Sure," she said.

And with that, Karen began to share some ideas—about smiling more, about moving away from the front of the room, about getting down to students' level when speaking to them individually or in small groups. Terry thought for a moment and gave a little nod. "That might work," she said. Karen jotted down some specific

strategies that Terry might try. They both looked at the list and added more ideas to the mix. The connecting had begun.

When Karen arrived at the next observation, she saw that Terry had already gotten her materials together before class and was casually talking to students. When the bell rang, Terry smiled, looked at the class and said enthusiastically, "Hello 2nd period!" In unison, the students responded, "Hello Ms. Smithson!" Terry smiled. Karen smiled. And class began.

Map It!

If we wish to raise the effectiveness of those who work in schools, we need to take time to get clear about what students need and what teachers can do to meet those needs. The outcome map helps us slow down so we can inform ourselves, empower one another, and ultimately increase student learning.

Endnote

[1] Garmston, R. J., & Wellman, B. (1999). *The adaptive school: A sourcebook for developing collaborative groups*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.