



David Nelson

*Director, Member Support Services
BCPVPA*

In August 2025, BCPVPA Executive Director Scott Robinson and I had the opportunity to present to more than sixty district leaders at the annual conference hosted by the BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA). Our session focused on strategies for supporting and building trust with the Principals and Vice-Principals they supervise.

One component of the session explored how district leaders can effectively engage in supportive conversations with school leaders to foster growth. A key theme was determining whether a situation lends itself to a supportive conversation, or requires more direct guidance.

In this article, I revisit those strategies in the context of *your* work as Principals and Vice-Principals. These same approaches can assist you in coming alongside teachers to engage in collaborative, trust-building conversations that strengthen relationships and support professional learning.



The Supportive Conversation

One of the most impactful ways school leaders can support teacher growth and strengthen school culture is through meaningful supportive conversations. These are not simple check-ins or performance reviews — they are relational, reflective dialogues grounded in curiosity, empathy, and trust.

Engaging in supportive conversations requires a shift from being a problem-solver or expert to being a listener and co-learner.



Assessing Readiness for Supportive Conversations

Before initiating a supportive conversation, school leaders must assess both the context and the teacher's readiness to participate. Ask yourself whether this is the best approach for this situation and this individual.

Key considerations include:

- **The teacher's skill and experience:** Are they new to the profession, or experienced? Do they have the capacity to navigate the issue with guidance, or are they currently unable to do so independently?
- **Your relationship with the teacher:** Have you established trust? Supportive conversations rely on psychological safety and the belief that your intent is to support rather than judge.
- **The teacher's mindset and emotional readiness:** Are they open to reflection and feedback, or are they overwhelmed or defensive? Are they willing to engage in this type of dialogue?
- **The nature of the situation:** Is the issue urgent, politically sensitive, or governed by policy, situations that may require more directive guidance? Or is the issue suited to exploration and reflection?

In short: ***Does the situation require clear direction, or is it an opportunity for a supportive conversation?*** These conversations work best when the teacher is both ready and willing to engage.



Strategies for Effective Supportive Conversations

The following strategies can guide school leaders in approaching supportive conversations with intention and care.

1. Begin by Listening

At the heart of every supportive conversation is deep, intentional listening. Be fully present. Reflect back what you hear, ask questions that deepen thinking, and resist the urge to jump in with solutions.

When teachers feel truly seen and heard, trust strengthens, and growth becomes possible.

2. Be Curious

Approach conversations with a genuine desire to understand. Shift from assessing to exploring:

- *What do you think is working well in this situation?"*
- *"What options do you see moving forward?"*

Curiosity transforms the dialogue from directive to collaborative and empowers teachers to take ownership of their growth.



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Equally important is embracing your own vulnerability. You don’t need all the answers. Not knowing can create opportunities to learn and grow together.”

3. Embrace Silence and Vulnerability

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Equally important is embracing your own vulnerability. You don’t need all the answers. Not knowing can create opportunities to learn and grow together.

4. Step Out of Your Title

One of the most powerful things a school leader can do is step out of their supervisory role during supportive conversations.

- Resist the urge to give advice.
- Position yourself as a collaborator rather than an evaluator.
- Trust in the teacher’s ability to lead their own learning.

5. Model Empathy and Understanding

Difficult situations can lead teachers to question their competence. Acknowledge and validate their feelings and reassure them that you will work together to identify solutions.

Use empathetic language such as:

- *“I am sorry this is happening.”*
- *I can see that this is really upsetting for you.”*

Empathy reduces defensiveness, builds trust, and opens the door to productive problem-solving.

6. Use Collaborative Language

Supportive conversations should feel like a shared journey. Use language that reinforces partnership and psychological safety:

- *“Let’s think about...”*
- *“What are some options we can explore?”*
- *“How might we approach this together?”*

7. Develop an Action Plan — Together

Supportive conversations should lead to purposeful action. Co-create a plan for moving forward:

- Identify one or two concrete next steps.
- Clarify the support you will provide.
- Set a time to check in and reflect on progress.

Focus on progress rather than perfection. The goal is continuous growth.

8. Don't Skip the Debrief

After implementing the plan, take time to reflect—both on the outcome and the process.

Ask:

- *"What worked well?"*
- *"What did we each learn?"*
- *"What might we do differently next time?"*

Debriefing reinforces a culture of learning and demonstrates your commitment to your own professional growth.



Final Thought

Every supportive conversation is an investment in a positive school culture. When you walk alongside a teacher during a challenging moment, you send a powerful message: you are not alone, and your growth matters.

By listening deeply, staying curious, and leading with empathy and humility, you help build a school culture where trust, reflection, and continuous improvement are not the exception — they are the norm.



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