EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

October 2011 | Volume **69** | Number **2**
Coaching: The New Leadership Skill Pages 18-22

1

What Good Coaches Do

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October 2011

When coaches and teachers interact equally as partners, good things happen.

The way we interact with others makes or breaks most coaching relationships. Even if we know a lot about content and pedagogy and have impressive qualifications, experience, or post graduate degrees, people will not embrace learning with us unless they're comfortable working with us.

Emotional intelligence and communication skills help, but another factor is crucial. After conducting close to two decades of research on instructional coaching, my colleagues and I at the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning have come to believe that how we *think* about coaching significantly enhances or interferes with our success as a coach. We suggest that coaches take a partnership approach to collaboration.

The partnership approach grew out of themes we found repeatedly in the literature from the fields of education, business, psychology, philosophy of science, and cultural anthropology (Knight, 2011).[1] We have synthesized those themes into seven principles that describe a theory of interaction currently used by hundreds of coaches across North America and around the world.

Seven Partnership Principles

Identifying our principles is important because the way we act grows naturally out of what we believe. The partnership principles of equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, praxis, and reciprocity provide a conceptual language that coaches can use to describe how they strive to work with teachers.

2

Equality

Equality is a necessary condition of any partnership. In true partnerships, one partner does not tell the other what to do; both partners share ideas and make decisions together as equals.

Problems arise, however, when people feel they don't have the status they believe they deserve. Usually, if we feel that someone who is helping us thinks that he or she is better than we are, we resist their help. For this reason, coaches need to be sensitive to how they communicate respect for the teachers with whom they collaborate.

At the Kansas Coaching Project, where we have watched many video recordings of coaches and teachers interacting, we see talented coaches skillfully act in ways that communicate that they do not see themselves as having higher status than their collaborating teacher. Coaches who act on the principle of equality have faith that the teachers they work with bring a lot to any interaction, and they listen with great attentiveness.

Choice

Coaches who act on the principle of choice position teachers as the final decision makers, as partners who choose their coaching goals and decide which practices to adopt and how to interpret data. Partners don't choose for each other.

Violating the principle of choice often increases the likelihood that teachers will resist change initiatives. As the saying goes, "When you insist, they will resist." Ironically, telling a professional that he or she must act a certain way is often a guarantee that the person will *not* want to do that. Indeed, meaningful commitment to an offer of help is only possible when we have the choice to say no. "If I can't say no," as Peter Block (1993) has written, "then saying yes has no meaning" (pp. 30–31).

Ensuring that teachers have meaningful choices does not mean that teachers are free to stop learning. Everyone in school needs to be actively engaged in professional growth, with the principal being the first learner. Most people, however, want to have a say in what and how they learn.

Voice

Conversation with a coach should be as open and candid as conversation with a trusted friend. When coaches follow the principle of voice, teachers feel free to express their enthusiasms and concerns.

When coaches respect teachers' voices, they seek out and act on teachers' opinions. Teachers' professional learning is driven in great part by the goals that teachers hold for themselves and their students. Thus, coaches might start the coaching process by videotaping teachers' classes, prompting them to watch the videos, and then asking them what *they* would like to focus on in light of what they saw. If teachers don't see how professional learning matters to them or their students, they won't be motivated to implement what they're learning.

Reflection

Much of the pleasure of professional growth comes from reflecting on what you're learning. When professionals are told what to do—and when and how to do it, with no room for their own individual thought—there's a good chance they're not learning at all.

We see a partnership coach as a thinking partner for teachers and coaching as a meeting of minds. When we watch videos of partnership coaches and teachers co-creating ideas during reflective conversations, we see two energized people who laugh, talk enthusiastically, and enjoy themselves.

Dialogue

When a coach and teacher engage in dialogue, they let go of the notion that they must push for a particular point of view. The goal is for the best idea to win—not for *my* idea to win—and the best idea wins most frequently when both partners think their way together through a discussion.

Paulo Freire's (1970) writing has laid the groundwork for much of our understanding of dialogue in education. He describes dialogue as a mutually humanizing form of communication. This means that my discussion partner and I become more thoughtful, creative, and alive when we talk in ways that are two-way rather than one-way.

Because dialogue is only possible when we value the participants' opinions, Freire suggests we enter into dialogue with humility. This often means that we temporarily withhold our opinion so we can hear others. Dialogue may also involve a kind of radical honesty. That is, rather than covering up the flaws in our argument or hiding our ignorance, in dialogue we display the gaps in our thinking for everyone to see. If we want to learn, we can't hide behind a dishonest veneer of expertise.

Praxis

Praxis describes the act of *applying* new knowledge and skills. When we study cooperative learning, for example, and then spend time planning how we'll integrate it into our lessons, we're engaged in praxis. Similarly, when we learn about asking effective questions and then write appropriate open-ended, nonjudgmental questions for our lessons, we're engaged in praxis. And when we learn about a new teaching practice, think about it deeply, and decide not to use it in our class, we're also engaged in praxis.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the belief that each learning interaction is an opportunity for everyone to learn—an embodiment of the saying, "When one teaches, two learn." When we look at everyone else as a learner *and* a teacher, regardless of their credentials or years of experience, we're often delightfully surprised by new ideas, concepts, strategies, and passions.

Reciprocity is the inevitable outcome of a true partnership. Seeing our partners as equals means we come into a conversation respecting and valuing them. Freeing our partners to make choices means they're free to surprise us with new ideas. Encouraging them to say what they think means we'll have an opportunity to learn what's important for them to share.

Reflection, dialogue, and praxis increase the chances that we'll learn from our colleagues because we're engaged in work focused on real-life situations and we share ideas about that work. Partnership is about shared learning as much as it is about shared power.

The Actions of Good Coaches

Saying you like the partnership principles and acting on them are two different things. Taking the partnership approach demands that we temporarily relinquish power—and that's never easy. However, when we give up top-down power and adopt a partnership approach to interaction, we replace the empty power that we get by virtue of our position with the authentic power gained through choice.

Coaches who act on the partnership principles engage in the following practices.

They Enroll Teachers

When teachers are forced to work with a coach, they often see coaching as a punishment. However, when teachers are offered coaching as one of many ways in which they can conduct professional learning, they often see it as valuable. Agreeing to continually improve and grow is part of joining the ranks of physicians, pilots, architects, and nurses. To do anything less is unprofessional.

Coaching should be a part of all professional learning that happens in a school. Schools should build time into workshops and professional learning communities so that teachers can plan how to collaborate with a coach to implement new practices. Principals should suggest coaching as one option for professional learning when they talk with teachers after classroom observations. Coaches should also give brief presentations on coaching and meet one-on-one with teachers to talk about how they can support professional learning.

Effective coaching makes it easier for teachers to learn and implement new ideas. Indeed, without follow-up such as coaching, most professional learning will have little effect.[2] When professional learning is central to a school's culture and when coaching is woven into all professional learning, most staff members won't need to be told to work with a coach. Most will choose to work with someone who makes it easier for them to learn new strategies, improve their skills, and reach more students.

They Identify Teachers' Goals

Coaches who take a top-down approach to coaching arrive in classrooms with a predetermined collection of strategies and see it as their job to convince the teacher to use them. However, when coaches take the partnership approach, their efforts are guided by specific goals that teachers hold for their students. Partnership coaches start by gathering data with or for the teacher. They then collaborate with the teacher to identify a specific student goal. Student goals can be either academic (for example, 95 percent of students will demonstrate mastery of this concept on the next test); behavioral (students will be on task more than 90 percent of the time); or attitudinal (90 percent of students will ask to read a book for pleasure over the break).

7

They Listen

Ensuring that others know we hear them and that we want to know their ideas communicates that we see them as partners. We can't be partners unless we understand how our partners see things.

During partnership coaching conversations, coaches create a setting in which collaborating teachers feel comfortable saying what they think. Coaches are curious to understand, and they make sure the conversation focuses on the teachers' concerns. In this way, they get to hear the real truth.

They Ask Questions

Coaches ask questions of their partners because they're more concerned with getting things right than with being right. Therefore, they ask good questions to which they don't know the answers —and they listen for the answers. For example, when they ask, "What evidence did you see that shows that your students are learning?" they want to know what the teacher thinks, not guide the teacher to see what they see. They stop persuading, and they start learning.

They Explain Teaching Practices

When coaches explain practices, they should be precise *and* provisional. As Atul Gawande pointed out in *The Checklist Manifesto* (2010), precision is an essential part of coaching. If we can't explain a practice clearly, we can't expect teachers to implement it effectively.

However, precision that doesn't account for an individual's thoughts and knowledge runs the risk of alienating teachers. Partnership coaches not only give precise explanations, but also ask teachers how they can adapt practices to best fit their teaching style and meet their students' needs. Thus, a coach might share a checklist describing how to model metacognitive reading strategies, with a step-by-step explanation of the process. However, while explaining it, the coach would ask the teacher whether that process would work for her students or for her teaching style.

The reality is that teachers will adapt practices to make them their own. By taking the partnership approach, coaches can collaborate with teachers on creating the best fit. To think that each practice must be done in exactly the same way in every classroom underestimates the complexity of the process. In education, as Eric Liu (2004) has explained, "It's never one size fits all; it's one size fits one."

8

They Provide Feedback

The term *feedback* often brings to mind traditional top-down feedback. We envision a coach who gives an athlete feedback on how to hit the ball or jump a hurdle. This kind of feedback usually involves giving some positive comments, explaining how to improve, and ensuring that the listener knows what he or she needs to do to improve.

When coaches take the top-down approach in school, they use data to explain what they think the teacher has done well and what she or he needs to do to improve. Top-down coaches do most of the talking because they want to make sure that teachers learn how to do something correctly. However, the problem with top-down feedback is that it's based on the assumption that there's only one right way to see things—and that right way is always the coach's way. An alternative to top-down feedback is the partnership approach—the collaborative exploration of data. Here, coach and teacher sit side by side as partners and discuss their interpretations of the data that the coach has gathered. Coaches don't withhold their opinions, but they offer them provisionally, communicating their openness to the teacher's point of view.

Partner for Success

The partnership approach builds on an old idea—that we should treat others the way we'd like them to treat us. Chances are we'll want someone who will help us by giving us choices about what and how we learn. We'll likely want a say in our learning, and we'll likely get more out of back-and-forth conversations than one-way lectures. Chances are we'll want our conversations to help us address real-life issues, and we'll be more open to new ideas if the person helping us respects us, has faith in us, considers us educated and capable of making good decisions, and sees us as an equal. Chances are we'll want to be treated like a partner.

Endnotes

- [1] For more information, read our research study, *The Partnership Approach: Putting Conversation at the Heart of Professional Development*, at www.instructionalcoach.org/tools/PartnershipLearning_EAQ.pdf.
- [2] For more information on the effects of coaching, see www.instructionalcoach.org/tools/Studying_the_Impact_of_Instructional_Coaching_4.0.pdf.

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