

Coaching Teachers: An Important Principal Role

A principal's most important role is instructional leader. There is a growing recognition of the importance of working with teachers, serving as a mentor and coach. Coaching has emerged as one of the more effective professional development options for adult learners. It is an important tool because it is an investment in human capital and in the systemic improvement of individual teachers and their school (Annenberg Institute, 2004).

What is Instructional Coaching?

Instructional coaching provides individual teachers with one-to-one assistance working on identified instructional needs. It is an improvement model based on the belief that teachers, given an opportunity, can diagnose their own teaching and identify ways to strengthen their work. Coaches help teachers identify the focus and then work with them to reflect on and improve their practice. Coaching can serve as a school-wide school improvement strategy. Because its focus is on the core work of teaching, it supports a culture of collaboration (Institute on Instructional Coaching, 2011).

Coach and Evaluator

Principals hold two roles---evaluator and coach. While evaluation is necessary, there is increasing recognition of the importance of coaching. The principal, rather than being the expert and telling a teacher what to do, serves as the "lead coach" responsible for engaging teachers in a process that respects them as learners, and works with them to reflect on their teaching and identify ways to strengthen their practice. When principals serve as coaches it is critical that the two roles remain separate and that clear boundaries be established about how information from coaching will be used.

Good Coaching

Coaching is a change from traditional roles. The primary role of the coach is to ask questions that are open-ended and promote cognition. Listening, probing for deeper meaning, and being non-judgmental are critical skills. Good coaching is built on a foundation of trust. It occurs when the coach creates a open, respectful and inviting setting. Coaching cannot be forced. Good coaches share several traits. They . . .

- **Enroll Teachers** – Coaching cannot be seen as punishment or as a requirement. Good coaches create a setting that welcomes teachers and in which teachers choose to participate.
- **Identify Teacher Goals** – A top-down approach rarely works. Good coaches help teachers identify goals for their work and support the teacher's efforts to improve.
- **Listen** – Perhaps no other skill is as important as the ability to listen intently to those being coached. Good coaches create a setting where teachers feel comfortable, can be candid without fear of retribution, and are curious and inquisitive.
- **Ask thoughtful Questions** – Good coaches ask thoughtful, open-ended questions that promote reflection. They are interested in promoting teacher cognition rather than providing answers.
- **Provide Feedback** – Good coaches don't provide feedback in the traditional sense. They don't tell teachers what to do. But they are comfortable using data from an observation, or comments made by the teacher, to provide feedback. All feedback is precise and non-judgmental. Good coaches are always open to the teacher's point-of-view. (Knight, 2011)



Resources

Selected print and online resources about this topic are available on page 3.

A Three-Step Coaching Model

The coaching process generally involves three phases---planning, observation, and analysis and reflection. Much like the clinical supervision model the approach is designed to engage the teacher in reflection on their teaching, a formative process (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

Step 1: Planning

During this step the teacher and coach meet to discuss the coaching, identify a focus for data collection, and agree on when an observation will occur.

Step 2: Observation/Data Collection

This step includes a visit to the classroom and collection of data that will inform a discussion about the focus area identified in the planning phase.

Step 3: Analysis and Reflection

This phase provides an opportunity to meet with the teacher to talk about the observation and the data that were collected. The emphasis is on engaging the teacher in a conversation to analyze and think about his or her teaching. Conclude with agreement on follow up and appropriate next steps.

Conditions for Success

- Presume positive intentions.
- Talk with the teacher to identify a focus for the work. Assume the teacher can analyze and reflect on their teaching and identify an area for growth.
- Ask clarifying questions to understand the context (students, content, prior learning), the lesson and the teacher's thinking about the design and delivery of the lesson.
- Remain non-judgmental
- Listen attentively and authentically; use paraphrasing to indicate that you are listening and understand what was said.
- Focus data collection on the area identified with the teacher.

Getting Started

Good coaching helps a person move from where they are to where they want to be (Aguilar, 2011). Coaching cannot be mandated and cannot be a requirement. Once trusting, respectful relationships are in place, principals can effectively serve as coaches and help teachers reflect on and improve their teaching.

Resources

Instructional Coaching – A Report of the Annenberg Foundation

<http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/InstructionalCoaching.pdf>

This report shares lessons from research on instructional coaching and the components of a successful coaching model.

Institute for Instructional Coaching

<http://instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org/guide-home>

After completing a free registration this site offers tools and resources for coaching teachers.

Coaching Teachers: What You Need to Know

http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2011/02/15/tln_coaching.html

This helpful article from Education Week reports on a recent study about coaching teachers. It discusses the benefits of coaching and identifies several important tips for principals.

Mentoring and Coaching – Education Development Center (EDC)

<http://cse.edc.org/products/teacherleadership/mentoring.asp>

This site provides useful tools for mentors and coaches.

Coaching Tips from a Former Principal

<http://www.edutopia.org/how-to-instructional-coaching-tips>

This article identifies key lessons from a principal who uses instructional coaching to improve her school.

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org>

E P I: Developing successful, long-lasting business and education partnerships with a positive impact on America's youth.

www.educationpartnerships.org

This brief prepared by Ronald Williamson, Eastern Michigan University, February 2012

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