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Coaching: The New Leadership Skill Pages 10-16

The Coach and the Evaluator

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Evaluation and coaching can work at cross-purposes if schools blur the distinctions between them.

Educators are familiar with the well-worn choreography of the typical supervisory conference: "Three to glow on, three to grow on." Three compliments regarding things the supervisor likes, followed by three suggestions for improvement. Three steps forward, three steps back.

But those three steps back cover a lot more territory than the three steps forward. Criticism stings, even when it's offered with the best of intentions. It can provoke frustration, fear, and a sense of failure. It can stimulate resentment and resistance, undermine self-efficacy, and increase unwillingness to change. In short, it can make performance improvement less, rather than more, likely.

Such conferences reflect the unfortunate blurring of the line between evaluation and professional development in schools. On the one hand, evaluation is a grading of an individual's performance. On the other hand, most supervisors hope this assessment will improve that performance. They may set performance-improvement goals in light of the assessment, with or without the threat of negative consequences if the employee doesn't meet those goals. They may also offer resources, such as mentoring, coaching, and training, to assist the professional in his or her efforts.

But these approaches typically generate little growth. Why do people fail to change in response to such initiatives? Why do they ignore mandated improvement goals? Why do power struggles, rather than cooperative efforts, so often ensue?

Getting Clear About the Terms

The answers to these questions require clarity concerning the differences between evaluation and professional development. Evaluation is not a prelude to development, and development is not a consequence of evaluation. Each function has a valuable place in schools, and schools would do well to learn how to do both better.

From an organizational point of view, evaluation is a key function of bureaucratic organizations, whereas development is a key function of professional organizations. Bureaucratic organizations rely on elements such as hierarchy of authority, a division of labor with specialization, and standardization

of work processes. Evaluations are conducted against these standards. Professional organizations are marked by collective inquiry, reflection, shared norms, and standardization of skills. Ongoing professional development is one of those norms.

Schools have always combined both bureaucratic and professional elements, but professional development has often taken a backseat to evaluation. Those who hold the power to create incentives, evaluate performance, and mete out consequences for noncompliance usually have the upper hand.

However, when the balance of power tips too far in favor of bureaucratic elements, schools experience the pitfalls of bureaucracies: Rules replace trust, communications become constrained, people hide problems, management becomes intrusive, and cooperation is withheld. Such pitfalls inevitably take a toll on the essential work of schools—student learning. Ironically, this often leads bureaucracies to redouble the pressure to get things right. They conduct even more evaluations and apply even more pressure on their employees to "shape up or ship out." The evaluators and bureaucrats may have won the battle, but schools are no longer happy places, and student success is increasingly at risk.

Such is the state in which many schools find themselves today. Teachers and school leaders alike yearn for schools that embody more adaptive responses, a collective press for excellence, open communication, collaborative relationships, and a culture of learning that extends beyond the students to include all stakeholders.

To that end, schools are increasingly looking to coaching and other relationship-based professional development strategies to improve the skills and performance of teachers and school leaders. Such interventions lead to schools that are more happily and productively engaged in the work of student learning.

Enter the Coaches

From the inspectorial committees of distinguished citizens in the 18th century to the scientific management principles and general supervisors of the early 20th century, U.S. schools historically have had strong elements of bureaucratic organization. They have also had persistent elements of professional organization, including special supervisors and other resource personnel to support the work of teachers by visiting classrooms, demonstrating techniques, and offering advice.

Those supportive, special supervisors reemerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries with the title of "coach," often with subject-matter expertise and designations such as literacy coach, math coach, technology coach, and data coach. In addition, principals and instructional leaders have been charged with "coaching" teachers. School leaders themselves now often work with leadership coaches to learn how to navigate transitions, improve staff relationships, and develop both short-term and long-range plans.

Embraced by administrators and teachers alike, coaching has become a vital tool of professionalism. But schools will realize its potential only by properly situating it in relationship to evaluation and by adopting best practices in coaching.

A common mistake is to link evaluation and coaching as cause and effect. It's tempting for evaluators to identify deficiencies and then specify coaching as a remediation strategy. This turns coaching into a consequence of a poor evaluation and termination into a consequence of failed coaching. Another mistake is to use coaching as a data source for evaluation. It's tempting for an administrator to ask a coach for information regarding teacher performance. Tying evaluation and coaching together in these ways compromises both functions.

At their best, evaluation and coaching proceed on separate but complementary tracks. Evaluation guarantees that all teachers and school employees meet agreed-on minimum standards of competent performance. Coaching invites all school employees to grow beyond those agreed-on minimums to more fully realize their potential and better serve their clients.

Both tracks are concerned with student learning and success. Both tracks are necessary and valuable. But they can work at cross-purposes if schools blur the distinctions between them (Nolan & Hoover, 2011).

Coaching as a Profession

By the start of the 21st century, professional coaching had established ethics, competencies, proficiencies, and masteries that take the process of adult learning far beyond the days of helpful "special supervisors" with their sage advice on how to manage classrooms or teach lessons. Unfortunately, many coaches in schools lack experience in evidence-based coaching methods. They often have no coach-specific training and lack effective models of coaching to guide their work. They're still likely to show up with helpful tips based on their own experience. Such directive "tell and sell" coaching models often do more harm than good.

Schools need adaptive, action-research approaches to coaching. Evocative "listen and learn" models incorporate the growing body of knowledge regarding adult learning, growth-fostering psychologies, and cognitive behavioral neuroscience. Good coaches respect teacher awareness, choice, and responsibility. They understand teacher experiences and show empathy and appreciation. They recognize vitality and build on teacher strengths. As such, coaching in schools can increase teacher professionalism and raise the bar of teacher effectiveness to a continuous and collective striving for excellence.

What Makes for Coaching Success

Coaching supports excellence by tapping into five crucial concerns (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2010).

A Concern for Consciousness

The coach's concern for consciousness generates increased self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-monitoring on the teacher's part. This lays the groundwork for all experiential learning. Fostering learning and growth requires mindfulness, the nonjudgmental awareness of what's happening in the present moment, as well as conscious awareness.

Take the case of Enrique, a lead teacher in a middle school world-language department, who had been trying to get another teacher, Janelle, to change some of her low-engagement teaching methods. Although Janelle had said she wanted to turn things around, nothing much had changed. Enrique decided to change his approach: Instead of focusing on her low-engagement methods, he asked Janelle if she would like to learn more about her own high-engagement moments.

Janelle was excited by the idea, so they agreed that Enrique would observe her teaching a lesson using an observation tool that would track student engagement and teacher location in five-minute increments. After the observation, they looked at the data together. Janelle wasn't surprised to see how much of a connection there was between high student engagement and her location in the classroom, but she was surprised to see the many long periods when she stood at the front of the room. She had always thought she moved around; the data revealed otherwise. After this "aha moment," Janelle took it on herself to design ways to keep moving more consistently around the classroom.

A Concern for Connection

The carrot and stick may, on occasion, prod people to meet minimum standards, but only high-trust connections can inspire greatness. Such connections free up teachers to take on new challenges by virtue of the safety net they create.

Such a connection was evident when Roxanne was asked to coach Nicole, a novice teacher, after Nicole received a disappointing performance evaluation from her principal. Knowing that the first meeting was likely to be filled with negative emotions and resistance, Roxanne decided to focus on expressing empathy for and understanding of Nicole's experience.

She was glad she did. When Roxanne walked into her room, Nicole burst into tears, exclaiming, "I don't want to lose my job! I'm trying to do this right! It just isn't working!" Roxanne honored that distress by celebrating Nicole's obvious desire to be a good teacher. "I hear your fear and frustration," Roxanne said, "because you really want to be successful." That simple reflection opened the door to a long conversation about Nicole's feelings, needs, and desires. By staying in this frame, rather than by trying to fix the problem, Roxanne was able to roll with Nicole's resistance until she could establish a life-giving connection.

On the basis of this connection, Roxanne worked with Nicole to create a professional development plan that enabled her to turn things around. Through more detailed planning and mental rehearsals of how to transition students between one lesson and the next, Nicole increased her self-efficacy as a teacher.

A Concern for Competence

By appreciating a teacher's current level of competence, coaches value the natural learning processes of those they coach. Encouraging teachers to clarify what they want and need, to build on their strengths, and to experiment in the service of mutually agreed-on goals empowers them to take more initiative and responsibility for their own learning and professional development.

Janet did just that. When she was selected to lead Creekside Elementary School, the central office told her she needed to get things under control because "the inmates were running the prison." Years of hands-off leadership had given the teachers permission to do whatever they wanted; the central office sent her in as the new sheriff in town.

However, Janet decided to take a different approach. At the first staff meeting, she announced that she was going to institute a peer-coaching program and that everyone had to participate. Staff members groaned and rolled their eyes as names were drawn out of a hat to determine who would be paired with whom. Then Janet gave the first assignment: "I want you to interview each other about your best experiences at Creekside Elementary, talk about what you value most about those experiences, and imagine how we could have more of them in the year ahead."

The groans and eye rolling began to fade. From that propitious beginning, Janet launched a peer-coaching and collaborative-observation program that focused on the things people did well. Their successes with student engagement and achievement, as well as other efforts that contributed to school spirit, were communicated through bulletin boards, newsletters, e-mail, and the school website. By celebrating competencies, rather than documenting deficiencies, Janet earned trust and respect, built teacher self-efficacy, and paved the way for a successful school turnaround.

A Concern for Contribution

Most teachers enter education for more than just a paycheck and summer breaks; they want to contribute to the learning and well-being of students, families, and communities. Unfortunately, the pressures of schooling can cause teachers to lose sight of the reason they became educators in the first place. When coaches invite educators to reconnect with that original inspiration, the motivation for continuous improvement takes off.

This is what happened when Paul was asked to coach a grade-level team on lesson planning for the reading workshop in the middle of the year. Not only had the team not made much progress with two previous coaches, but the administration was also concerned about the team's refusal to align with school and district initiatives.

Instead of jumping into planning, Paul started the first coaching session with an energy check-in. Teachers expressed how frustrated and overwhelmed they were feeling. Paul spent a few minutes discussing the reasons for these feelings, relating them to everyone's core values as teachers. As team members considered this perspective and told stories of what it was like for struggling students to work their way through the old basal readers, they gradually warmed up to the idea that they could perhaps serve these students more effectively with the new curriculum.

Having time to freely voice their concerns in a nonjudgmental setting and fully express their commitment to student learning and success, group members decided to explore possibilities. They brainstormed how they could meet district requirements and also teach in ways that worked best for them, including using different books, activities, and assessments to facilitate more adaptive learning in the classroom. Group members were energized by the brainstorming process and asked for additional grade-level coaching sessions. A veteran teacher said that she hadn't been so excited about coming to work in years, that she enjoyed teaching again.

A Concern for Creativity

For true learning to take place, coaching must also unleash creativity. The coaching space needs to be a no-fault playing field in which teachers can follow their motivation and adopt a beginner's mind as to what steps they will take to achieve their goal. Creativity can't be coerced; it can only be invited.

Take the case of Heather, a successful chemistry teacher in a high-performing suburban high school. Two of her students have been finalists in the U.S. National Chemistry Olympiad, a prestigious competition sponsored by the American Chemical Society. To maintain her high level of teaching excellence, Heather has enjoyed many mentoring and coaching relationships during her 10-year career. Early on, these instilled in her a strong ethic of continuous improvement. She came to value the process of reflecting on and improving her pedagogical methods.

Heather has subsequently relied on peer coaching and collaboration to continually develop fresh methods of teaching chemistry, moving from traditional expository lectures to hands-on, student-centered, problem-based learning. Her students work independently and with others to increase their self-efficacy with chemistry and share their learning with the entire class using PowerPoint presentations. Heather's collaborators, including her department chair and several colleagues, make frequent use of brainstorming, inquiry, and research to generate ideas, design lessons, and create labs that will engage and support student learning. The combination of freedom, collaboration, and accountability is the driving force behind Heather's creativity.

What Coaching Needs to Be

Research into adult learning, growth-fostering relationships, and cognitive-behavioral neuroscience points to three principles that are crucial to successful coaching.

It Must Be Teacher-Centered

Teacher-centered is different from *coach-centered*. When conversations are coach-centered, the coach's expertise has the upper hand. The coach demonstrates, advises, and teaches. The more knowledge the coach has, the more tempted he or she will be to take a coach-centered approach. Unfortunately, this often undermines learning: People don't resist change, they resist *being* changed.

To facilitate learning, coaches must take off the expert hat, asking rather than telling, in order to assist teachers to adapt recommendations and find their own best way forward. Authentic coaching puts teachers at the center of their own professional learning. They own the process. They're animated, energized—and in charge.

It Must Be No-Fault

No-fault is different from *high-stakes*. When conversations are high-stakes, coaches have crossed the line into evaluation, watching and listening to analyze and correct what's wrong. Crossing that line is problematic when it comes to professional development. Assessing performance problems can trigger destructive patterns of faultfinding and finger-pointing, regardless of how constructive the intentions

of the coach may be. In the search for causes (what to blame), people too often find culprits (whom to blame). Internalizing such judgments can take a crippling toll on teacher self-efficacy and motivation.

When teachers don't do as well as they would like, coaches need to listen carefully and express empathy to facilitate the release of negative emotions, which have been shown to have a detrimental effect on learning, creativity, and openness to change (Fredrickson, 2009). Through empathetic listening, coaches reduce defensiveness and increase teacher engagement in their own professional development.

It Must Be Strengths-Based

Strengths-based is different from *deficit-based*. When conversations are deficit-based, the weaknesses of teachers have the upper hand. The focus is on problem areas that need to be fixed. Focusing on deficits also shifts the responsibility for learning to the coach, who presumably knows how to do things better.

Strengths-based coaching starts with a different assumption: In every situation, no matter how bleak, something always works. By identifying those areas of positive practice, coaches help teachers to build self-efficacy, set self-directed learning goals, brainstorm strategies, and design ways of moving forward. By discovering and developing their strengths, teachers can transform their weaknesses without having to tackle them head on.

This approach is radically different from the "three to glow on, three to grow on" conversations that often take place during evaluations. Strengths-based coaching conversations stay with three positive questions: Where are the signs of vitality in a teacher's current practice? What can we learn from those signs about teacher strengths and capacities? How can we leverage that learning to invite new possibilities for teacher growth and change? Consistently staying with these questions generates positive emotions, robust professional development conversations, creative experimentation, and transformational learning. Schools would do well to create conditions for such collaborative, strengths-based dialogue.

Rita and Sarah's experience exemplifies such an approach. Rita was a reading specialist in a K–5 school that had high levels of poverty and a high transiency rate but few support services and no Title I funding. She was overwhelmed by the number of students who needed reading intervention. She agreed to meet one-on-one with Sarah, a teacher consultant who had been assigned to work with teachers to improve language arts instruction. They were to come up with a plan for the year.

Rita began the meeting feeling edgy and frustrated. She couldn't see how to help either her teachers or the students, and she was certain that Sarah had neither the resources nor the ability to help her. After acknowledging both Rita's discouragement and Rita's intention to make a positive contribution, Sarah noticed a lessening of tension as well as an openness to start talking about what they could do within the constraints.

Sarah invited Rita to look at the data and identify what was going well. Rita was taken aback because she had been expecting Sarah to focus on the many problems. She actually chuckled at the thought of looking for success, expecting she wouldn't find much, but then she began pointing out grade levels

where all the students who needed help were getting it as well as instances where teachers had modified their schedules to make sure students were getting intervention services.

Rita began to realize that many things were going well and that her main concern was just a handful of kids. Sarah suggested they brainstorm at least 10 ways that Rita and other staff members could support these students. They put a number of "crazy" ideas on the table; rather than derailing the process, those ideas made the process not only more fun but also more productive.

Rita selected the ideas she wanted to implement. These included purchasing books at students' individual reading levels, sending books home daily to increase reading time, working with classroom teachers to ensure the students were getting guided reading instruction daily, and rearranging the schedule to give Rita or a reading tutor additional time to work with students. Equipped with these and other ideas, Rita then helped Sarah develop a clear action plan for the next semester. With a smile on her face, Rita thanked Sarah for the coaching conversation which, she said, not only had developed a great plan but also had lifted her spirits.

Working Together for School Success

Schools that understand and respect the different functions of evaluation and coaching will have greater success in their professional development endeavors. Using these teacher-centered, no-fault, strengths-based approaches, they can improve teacher effectiveness and enhance the dynamics of their professional learning communities.

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