

Instructional  
**COACHES**  
and the  
Instructional  
**LEADERSHIP TEAM**

*A Guide for School-Building Improvement*

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# “I’m So Glad You’re **1** Here!”

## *The First Day as an Instructional Coach*

### DAY ONE

Mrs. Janice Wright, Instructional Coach  
Journal Entry: September 6

*What a day! I’ve had crazy days before at this school but never anything like this. Teaching has never been easy. I’ve been there with the frustrations, pressures, and uncertainty, but I always knew what the mission was and where I fit in with that mission. I had twenty-two fourth graders, and it was my job to make sure they learned everything, stayed safe and happy, and worked toward proficiency or better on their standardized tests. It was a tough job for sure, but I always knew what the job was and so did everyone else. But not today!*

*Today, I started a new job at school, and I have never been so confused, so lost, or so scared in my entire professional life. I came home more worried and upset than ever before, and I am starting to rethink this entire thing.*

*After ten years in the classroom, I was happy but stuck. I wanted a new challenge, a new perspective. I wanted to make a difference beyond my classroom, and, yes, I wanted a little recognition for all my skills and good work. I did not want to become an administrator. Not me! No way! That is an important role for sure, but I wanted to keep closer to my role as teacher, plus a little more. They posted the position of Instructional Coach and I jumped at it, but now I have no idea what I said “Yes” to.*

*When I got to school this morning, I headed for Principal Sander’s office. It was weird not going to my old classroom and thinking of someone else in there setting up my bulletin board. I guess I’ll have to get over that. I knocked on Principal Sander’s door and when invited in, I sat down, hoping to discuss the day ahead.*

*“I’m glad you’re here!” she said with a big smile. “There is so much to do, and I can use all the help I can get. I know we’ve talked a little about all you will be*

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*doing this year, but I wrote down some things I think you might do, just to get us started. We can refine and revise as we go along. I can't tell you how happy I am to finally have some help around here. Well, here is the list. Why don't you check out your new office, and I'll meet you in a half hour in the library for the opening faculty meeting. I am so glad you are here!"*

*With that, her phone rang and I took it as my cue to leave the office. I headed to my new office, a converted book storage room across the hall; not a bad space—just not my space. Not yet anyway. I sat down with my coffee and started reading the list Principal Sanders had handed me. By the time I got to the third item, I was questioning everything about this decision I had made to become the school's instructional coach. The list she had made included the following tasks:*

1. Assist with student discipline as needed
2. Standardize test administration
3. Cover office when principal is out of the building
4. Visit classrooms and teacher consultation
5. Serve as parent liaison
6. Organize testing materials and supplies
7. Serve as school rep on ELA curriculum committee

*Is this what an instructional coach is supposed to be doing? What did these things have to do with instruction? This sounds like an assistant principal's job description and more. I don't want to be an administrator.*

*This was clearly not what I had signed on for. I wasn't sure what my new job was, but I knew this wasn't what I thought it was. How could I handle all of these tasks and still have time to really make a difference in the academic achievement of our students? The only task on the list I thought did belong was number four. How could I tell Principal Sanders that I just didn't agree that assisting with student discipline was a part of my new role? After all, she is my boss and I am supposed to be helping her, right? What a mess I have made for myself! How am I ever going to get it straightened out?*

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Mrs. Skyler Sanders, School Principal  
Journal Entry: September 6

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*Today was the first day of school. It is always exciting, but this year, I think is going to be particularly good. I welcomed the students back to school at a morning assembly and had the first meeting with Mrs. Wright, my instructional coach. Although this is only my second year here as principal, I know Mrs. Wright will do an excellent job as an instructional coach. She is a highly effective teacher who understands classroom instruction and the literacy program we are now using here. Most important, she is very well respected by the other teachers. I think she will do a superb job.*

*We have never had an instructional coach here before at Franklin Elementary. I am not exactly sure what an instructional coach is or what one does. But when the district office called me over the summer and said that they had grant monies to fund an instructional coach for the next three years and did we want one, I certainly wasn't going to refuse. Who refuses help like this? Besides, I also know*

*that the principals in the other elementary buildings were getting instructional coaches. Hopefully, she will be able to take some of the load off my desk and free me up so I can go in and conduct more observations of teachers.*

*During our meeting today, I gave Mrs. Wright a list of her new job responsibilities. A lot of them were things that I know I am supposed to be doing, but I honestly can’t find the time. It is going to be a big help having her around to take some of the load off. I imagine that after awhile she will be able to get into the classrooms and help teachers directly, but for now I need her to help me as much as possible, to shoulder some of this responsibility I have on a daily basis. I am so glad she is here. This is going to be a great school year!*

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Ms. Amanda Shaffer, Veteran Teacher  
Journal Entry: September 6

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*Today was the first day of school. At the assembly this morning, Principal Sanders announced that Mrs. Wright was going to be our instructional coach for our building this year. Principal Sanders said that many of the other elementary buildings also got an instructional coach and that these coaches are supposed to help us improve our instruction. I have been teaching for 20 years. Why didn’t someone ask me if I wanted to be an instructional coach? I think I do a pretty good job with these students, so I don’t know how much help the instructional coach will be. If she thinks she is going to come into my room and tell me what to do, she’d better think again. Some of the other teachers were talking about it in the break room this afternoon. They said that we’d better be careful; they had heard that this instructional coach was going to be a spy for administration and that Mrs. Wright was reporting directly to the principal. In fact, several of the teachers said that the instructional coach had already met with the principal first thing this morning. I will be nice to her, but I am not going to let her in my room. She can’t help me. All in all though, I guess it was a good first day. It feels good to be back. Now, I just have to make it through one more school year. Can’t wait until June . . .*

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### **WHAT IS AN INSTRUCTIONAL COACH (IC)?**

Instructional coaches have recently become a popular strategy for schools in need of improvement (Makibbin, & Sprague, 1993). While there are many titles used to refer to instructional coaches (e.g., school leader, instructional support specialist, curriculum specialist, etc.) one thing remains certain—their purpose. The purpose of the instructional coach (IC) is to work directly and indirectly with teachers, staff, and the building principals to improve the effectiveness of classroom instruction and increase student learning, performance, and overall achievement; however, the IC cannot and will not be successful working solo in a school building. Researcher studies suggest that it takes a school community working with its IC to be successful in improving classroom instruction and eventually student performance.

## THE INSTRUCTIONAL COACH—THE EARLY EXPLORER

In some ways, being an instructional coach is like being an early explorer, setting sail for uncharted waters. While there is certainly research and literature to guide instructional coaches, the process or steps an instructional coach takes to be successful still remains virtually unexplored. Ultimately, the coach has to be willing to try out certain strategies and practices to determine what works. In some ways, the instructional coach has to be a researcher, conducting small, informal experiments; studying what strategies or techniques are the most effective for changing teachers' classroom practices; and improving classroom instruction. While the uncertainty of this job may be frightening, for those who want to reflect critically on practice and collaborate with others, the opportunity is quite different from years of teaching in a classroom.

Many times, administrators introduce an instructional coach to a school, believing that an instructional coach is the secret ingredient needed to fix a low-performing school (Joyce, Showers, Murphy, & Murphy, 1989). While having an instructional coach is certainly a step in the right direction, an effective instructional coach is not something that happens by accident or chance. In fact, experts note that this type of success only happens with a lot of planning, time, commitment, support, and strategizing (Saphier & West, 2010).

In the case depicted in the earlier journal entries, several steps should have taken place to avoid what transpired in the school. Presented below are the steps:

- Step One: Establish an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) (e.g., principal, IC, teachers, and staff).
- Step Two: Establish a job description for the IC.
- Step Three: Establish the role and responsibilities for the IC.
- Step Four: Develop an action plan for the IC.

### STEP ONE: ESTABLISH AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAM (ILT)

In further examining this situation, it is important to remember that the principal is still the instructional leader of the building; however, this creates a real challenge for principals trying to improve the instructional level in the building. We all acknowledge the fact that in order to improve instruction, one has to enter the classroom to observe it. No matter how much the principal reassures a teacher that the observation and



feedback is informal and for improving practice, the teacher believes that he or she is being judged. The IC, being a third party (and not in an administrative position), can function differently in this situation.

Take another minute to reexamine the three journal entries at the beginning of this chapter. Then ask yourself: How did one great idea get so misunderstood so quickly? The obvious answer is that there was no clear understanding or agreement about the instructional coach’s role prior to its launch. That is the obvious answer, but not the entire answer. The bigger issue surrounds a concept that is usually seen in a very positive light: Help is coming! Help was arriving for this school in the form of a new position—an instructional coach; however, in a situation such as this, where help arrives undefined, those who need the assistance will define it through their own lens, regardless of the relevance to its intended goals. Help can be seen as a welcomed gift, but it also can be received with suspicion and an assumption of judgment, as shown in the journal entries above. Unsolicited help can be greatly resented, feared, and sometimes even sabotaged. Those who welcome the help will, if permitted, focus it on their immediate needs while ignoring (for the most part) what the original intent of the help was for.

In this scenario, help was seen as coming from one, and only one, outside source—the instructional coach. Somehow this help would magically be able to fix all the problems in a school building. We all know that *real* help comes from the facilitation of problem solving by those most closely involved. Real help comes not as a Band-Aid but as an entire first aid kit, providing the practitioners with the right tools, opportunities, and information at the right time. Real help comes from within the group that requires it.

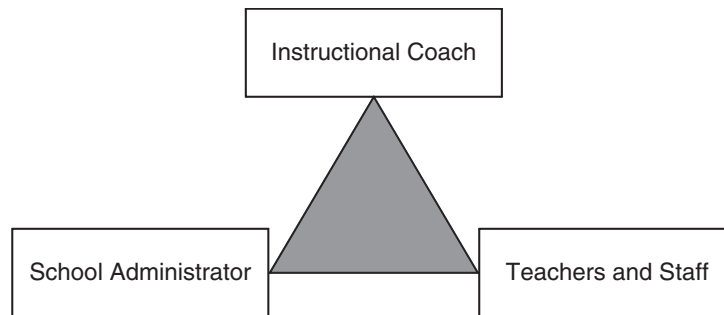
Despite how the help was perceived by the various players in this situation, we do know that the instructional coach model works—and works well when properly implemented and supported (Knight, 2007). We also believe it only works when it is an important component in a broader Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). The ILT includes not only the IC, but also the support of the school leader and faculty. The ILT is a team of three as shown here in Figure 1.1.

As you can see from Figure 1.1, the ILT is made up of three main components: the school administrator, the IC, and teachers/staff. It is these three entities working together that identify issues related to instruction in the building (as well as determine methods to address these issues). In the next chapter, you will see how the IC works with the ILT to accomplish these feats.

The IC can, and must, work within this team of three to develop a fluid, responsive, proactive, research-based process that is present throughout the fabric of the school community. Within this framework, the role of the

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**Figure 1.1** The Instructional Leadership Team



IC can be defined, revised, and redefined as needs arise. If this is done, it will help to ensure that this position will be a benefit for everyone involved.

### STEP TWO: ESTABLISH A JOB DESCRIPTION FOR THE IC

As you read the earlier journal entries, you may have asked yourself the question, why didn't the school district develop a job description for the instructional coach? Could all of this confusion been prevented? This is a good question, and in most cases, the answer would have been "yes." A job description is a written statement that conveys key characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities for a position. While job descriptions will vary greatly depending on the nature of the position, all job descriptions should have some essential elements. A carefully constructed job description should have the qualifications one needs to hold the position, a general list of task and responsibilities, salary range, and benefits. It also should clearly identify the persons to whom the IC would report.

As you can see from the journal entries, having all members of the school building aware of the role and responsibilities of the IC is a pivotal component to the overall success of this initiative. Without it, things could become counterproductive for all members of the school community, preventing the attainment of the primary goal of improved students' learning and academic achievement.

The role of instructional coach is and must always be tailored to meet the specific and evolving needs of the school, its faculty, and its principal. There is no "one size fits all" boilerplate job description that will cover every nuance of this component of the Instructional Leadership Team. Because of the complexities of the IC position, developing a job description that accurately reflects the depth and breadth of work an IC may conduct is both critical as well as challenging. Despite these challenges, there are some general guidelines that districts can embrace as the overarching blueprint within which all the tailoring may occur.