

I've had the pleasure of working with some astonishingly good people from the Beaverton, Oregon, School District. Three times a year, on their own time, instructional coaches Susan, Michelle, Jenny, Lea, and Rich come to the Kansas Coaching Project at The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning to collaborate with my colleagues and me. They come for one reason: they want to become better instructional coaches.

Our meetings are highlight days for me even though what we do is fairly simple. Most of the time, the coaches watch themselves doing their work on video¹ and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of what they see themselves doing. This work is not easy. The conversations demand that the coaches be courageous, supportive, open-minded, reflective, and above all, committed to learning. Together, we take an honest look at what is working and what we can do better. They watch themselves coaching; our research team watches our ideas in action to see what works and what needs to be refined. Each day is filled with substantial reflective comments, kind words, hard truths, laughter, fun, energy, and, mostly, learning.

During one of our meetings, I decided to document what was happening, so I asked everyone to write down a few words that described how they felt. What they wrote offers some insight into what we experience.

- Learning, exploration, humbling, in awe, affirming, reflection, imperative for growth/change, helpful
- Sweaty, shaky, good, validation, curious, aha moments, respected and collegial, safe, insightful, nervous
- Pride, laughter, nervousness, sincerity, humility
- Sweaty, nerve-wracking, exposing, vulnerable . . . yet comforted, validated, supported, encouraged, learning a ton, silence is golden

Their words surface what makes our sessions together so significant—we are energized by learning with each other. Since we cannot avoid reality (it is right on the screen for all to see in the recordings of coaching sessions), our talk focuses on issues that really matter. However, because we like and respect each other, because as a community of learners we have a stake in each other's well-being, we treat each other kindly and supportively, and that tenderness toward each other makes it possible for us to feel safe

1. As part of our design study of coaching, the coaches use micro cameras to record every minute of their coaching practices and then review the video.

some restrictions. Otherwise, it might sound like noise” (p. 214). The ability to improvise, he said, comes from fundamental knowledge and this knowledge “limits the choices you can make and will make. Knowledge is always important where there’s a choice” (p. 214).

Productivity guru Scott Branson (2010) makes the same point. Form, in the structure of constraints on creativity, he proposes, is essential for getting things done.

Constraints—whether they are deadlines, budgets, or highly specific creative briefs—help us manage our energy and execute ideas. While our creative side intuitively seeks freedom and openness—the blue sky projects—our productivity desperately requires restrictions. (p. 87)

Choice stands at the heart of Impact Schools, but choice occurs within a structure. Much of the rest of this book articulates how freedom and form co-exist, indeed how meaningful choice can only occur within a structure.

Voice: Professional Learning Should Empower and Respect the Voices of Teachers

If partners are equal, if they choose what they do and do not do, they should be free to say what they think, and their opinions should count. For that reason, those taking the partnership approach recognize that professional learning needs to value the opinions of all participants, not just those of the change leader. In fact, learning is significantly limited unless everyone’s voice is encouraged and heard.

When we take the partnership approach, we create opportunities for people to express their own points of view. This means that a primary benefit of partnership is that everyone gets a chance to learn from others because others share what they know. In partnership workshops, for example, all participants have the freedom to express their opinions about the content being covered. Similarly, during partnership coaching conversations, the coach creates a setting where collaborating teachers feel comfortable saying what they think. We hear the real truth when we engage in a real partnership conversation.

To encourage people to share their thoughts honestly, change leaders taking the partnership approach often adopt a method aptly summarized in Stephen Covey’s (1989) phrase, “seek first to understand, then be understood” (p. 235). Thus, they enter into conversations by

the authors mean that positive comments about others are more effective when we describe our experience of others rather than the attributes of others. Simply put, we share with them what behaviors we saw, and then, like a partner, we let them reach their own conclusions.

Before concluding their conversation, the coach and teacher should clarify how close they are to their goal and identify what steps to take next to move forward together.

Explore

Goal: To identify what went well during the practice attempt and what adjustments need to be made if the goal has not been met

Actions:

1. Prior to meeting, review the recording of the lesson and identify at least three sections that you think are excellent and two sections that you think would be meaningful to discuss.
2. Ask the teacher to also identify three sections that they think are excellent and two sections that they have concerns about.
3. Give the teacher a copy of the observation protocol or protocols.
4. Review the video as well.
5. Identify at least three clips you think are well done and plan direct, specific, non-attributive feedback.
6. Identify sections that you think would be profitable to discuss.
7. Choose questions (review the question sheet) that you think will open up the conversation.
8. Meet with the teacher to review the teacher's and your clips.
9. Pause the recording when you talk.
10. Use open-ended nonjudgmental questions to open up meaningful conversation.
11. Identify a SMART goal for the next step.

Time: 20–60 minutes

Refine

Rarely is a teacher ready to integrate a new practice after one run-through, so coaches must be prepared to provide ongoing support to ensure teachers maintain use of and integrate the new practice into their repertoire of teaching methods. Again, partnership stands at the

classroom management expert Jim Fay. Right before a break, I tell participants that we are about to take a break and that although the break is 15 minutes long, they may take as long as they'd like, "one hour, two hours, whatever they wish." Then I add, "However, you must know that in 15 minutes I will show an absolutely hilarious film clip, so if you are not back in 15 minutes, you'll miss it."

This approach provides participants with the freedom to come back when they can, but at the same time it ensures that almost everyone will be back on time. I have seen superintendents running down the halls of a hotel because they wanted to make sure they were back for the funny film clip. Of course, if you use this method, you'd better deliver on your promise and have a truly hilarious clip to show when participants return.

Getting Feedback From Participants

I also like to use structures that allow me to get feedback from participants. For example, I frequently use response cards to gauge whether or not participants understand the content we are learning. Thus, after explaining the difference between mechanical and metaphorical learning, for example, I might ask participants to hold up a card to represent their level of understanding with 1 equaling "I'm lost," 2 equaling "I've got questions," and 3 equaling "I understand. Let's move on."

Spokespeople Hosts

One way to structure groups is to ask people to volunteer to be responsible for reporting back on their group's actions (spokespeople) or to guide a discussion about a particular topic (hosts).

One fun way to identify speakers is to ask everyone in your audience to close their eyes. Ask them to point at the person whom they want to be the spokesperson. Then ask them to open their eyes. The person who is pointed at the most becomes the spokesperson. Usually, this activity leads to a lot of laughter, and it also identifies the spokesperson. A spokesperson's job is quite simple. After a small group performs a task, the spokesperson tells the larger group what transpired. For example, if a group is working on developing guiding questions, a spokesperson tells the larger group what questions were created and what they learned while developing the questions.

Be Nonjudgmental

Michael Fullan has written about the importance of leaders taking a nonjudgmental stance. In *The Six Secrets of Change* (2008) he writes,

Nonjudgmentalism is a secret of change because it is so very heavily nuanced. You have to hold a strong moral position without succumbing to moral superiority as your sole change strategy. As [William] Miller puts it,

When we strive for some great good or oppose some great evil, it is extremely difficult not to spill out some of the goodness onto ourselves and the evil onto our opponents, creating a deep personal moral gulf. It is very difficult, in other words, professing or striving for something righteous, to avoid self-righteousness and moral condemnation. (p. 60)

No matter how skillfully crafted our questions are, they will fail if we judge our conversation partners' responses. Dennis and Michelle Reina in *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace* (2006) have written about the importance of what they call "communication trust," which they define as "The willingness to share information, tell the truth, admit mistakes, maintain confidentiality, give and receive constructive feedback, and speak with good purpose" (p. 34).

Conversational trust develops, according to the Reina and Reina, "when people feel comfortable and safe enough to share their perceptions regarding one another's perceptions without repercussions. They trust they will not suffer the consequences of retaliation because they spoke the truth" (p. 47). Passing judgment on the answers others give to our questions almost always destroys conversational trust.

Strategy 3: Be nonjudgmental.

There are two simple things you can do to not be judgmental. First, when asking good questions, you need to listen without assumptions and without prejudging your conversation partner. If you jump to conclusions about what your partner says, chances are they will notice and then be less open.

Second, to remain nonjudgmental when you ask questions, let go of the desire to give advice. For some reason, most of us have an almost uncontrollable desire to tell others how they should go about their business. However, in almost all cases, our partners don't want that advice unless they explicitly ask for it. What people want is someone who listens, values their ideas, and is empathetic and nonjudgmental.