

LEARNING FROM COACHING

How do I work with an instructional coach to grow as a teacher?

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Introduction

Congratulations! You're embarking on an incredibly important journey with a colleague to help navigate the continual changes that are inherent in education. A coaching relationship, if entered into with thoughtfulness and intention on the part of you and your coach, can help you become and continue to be the best educator and leader you can be. This publication will deepen your understanding of the purpose of coaching, the teacher-coach relationship, and the responsibilities you have to each other.

You made the decision to enter what I consider the most challenging profession on Earth: teaching. Good teachers manage to cultivate deep personal relationships with their students while also demonstrating their content knowledge and pedagogical expertise in a very public setting. This in itself is emotionally and intellectually challenging. To complicate matters, though, new technology and research about the brain and learning continually impact and redefine “best practices” in the classroom. Teachers—who have very little time for additional study and training—are expected to implement these practices with expertise. On top of that, many teachers work in school environments with limited resources and have students with diverse linguistic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Ultimately, teachers’ roles

require them to be excellent leaders and collaborators with colleagues, parents, administrators, and support professionals. This whole process takes place in a highly political environment of constant change.

Unlike other high-profile, challenging industries, the education field rarely has adequate support structures in place to help teachers navigate the professional demands they face on a daily basis. When I was hired for my first teaching job, I was expected to know (or be able to figure out on my own) what to do in the classroom, how to stay abreast of changes in best practices, and how to deal with any difficulties I might face. My principal made infrequent check-in visits and mandatory evaluative observations that felt more like a test of my ability than an opportunity for growth.

Absent an assigned mentor, I gathered my own. More experienced teachers in the building were kind enough to give the rookie a few tips and resources. As I became more experienced, though, those relationships became more social than professional, and I began to feel like a private contractor. This feeling was so strong that I considered leaving the profession; despite my hard work, I could not grow professionally like I wanted to.

This changed when I was introduced to instructional coaching. As a teacher, I began to see that I could solve almost any instructional problem if I had someone help me think about it through a coaching conversation. As a leader, I began to see how I could improve the quality of my relationships and performance using coaching skills. I discovered that I could have more effective parent engagement and

productive parent-teacher meetings using the principles of coaching.

For the last few years, I have been teaching leaders and coaches how to develop instructional coaching programs. A recurring question from coaches and other school leaders is this: *We know coaching works, but how do we get teachers to choose to be coached and to make the most of it?* I think part of the answer is to invite teachers to prepare themselves for coaching by understanding it, reflecting on it, and then making the decision to use the process in their own professional growth. Consider this *your* invitation.

This publication reflects some basic beliefs about coaching:

1. Anyone who wants to excel and be the best at his or her chosen profession needs coaching.
2. Coaching is about helping you think more deeply about your work, organize your thoughts, set your own goals, and develop a plan to meet those goals.
3. Coaching is controlled by the teacher, not the coach. *You* are in the driver's seat.
4. Coaching is a relationship between two or more people, and all parties to the relationship are responsible for its success.
5. Coaching is confidential and based on trust.

Although there is a profession called coaching, there is also a coaching lifestyle that can benefit any leader, teacher, or parent. It is a lifestyle of asking instead of telling; listening more than speaking; and developing a deep, rich community

with colleagues instead of superficial social cliques. This lifestyle is not just for professional coaches; it is for everyone who has the opportunity to coach or be coached in his or her personal and professional relationships.

The first four sections that follow deal with some major concerns I have heard from teachers:

1. What is coaching, and why is it important?
2. What is a coach, and what can I expect from him or her?
3. What is my role in the coaching relationship?
4. How do I make sure coaching is effective and productive?

The fifth section describes some problems that can arise and offers some suggestions for dealing with them. The Encore section at the end offers some additional resources that may be helpful as you begin your coaching experience.

What Is Coaching, and Why Is It Important?

Coaching is a general term used to describe a job, process, relationship, skill, model for professional development, and strategy for change in an organization. Because coaching can be defined so broadly, in so many different contexts,