



Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper

Coaching

A Continuum of Professional Development

“We only think when we are confronted with a problem.”

~ often attributed to John Dewey

THE NATURE OF COACHING

The job description for a literacy coach is as multi-dimensional as reading itself. One must possess the social skills of a seasoned politician, the knowledge of an ivy-league professor, the experience of a veteran schoolteacher, and the flexibility of a gymnast. In short, a coach is all things to all people—a virtual Eagle Scout. And it seems that every school in the United States is in the market for the perfect coach. Applicants struggle to make sense of a job description that seems to have no boundaries. A district in Colorado, for example, listed the following requirements among 25 similarly vague, but lofty, qualifications for those interested in applying for a coaching position.

- Knowledge and experience implementing best practices in instruction.
- Demonstrated success in communicating effectively with teachers, principals, parents, students, and paraprofessionals.
- A resource who is skillful, reliable, and accessible
- A working knowledge of current research and resources related to district and site-based goals, staff development, and group processes.

The faint-hearted need not apply.

Clearly, the coach being referenced is not the person who teaches gym class. What, then, is a coach and why are schools all over America scrambling to hire one? Although definitions abound, *The Heart of the Matter: The Coaching Model in America's Choice Schools*, a research report from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education described coaching as “a form of inquiry-

based learning characterized by collaboration between individuals or groups of teachers and more accomplished peers” (Poglinco, Bach, Hovde, Rosenblum, Saunders, & Supovitz, 2003, p. 1). This inquiry-based approach has led to significant improvement in student learning. In a school that implemented a coaching program in Corpus Christi, Texas, between 22% and 35% of students increased their reading comprehension test scores more than three grade levels in three years (Galm & Perry, 2004). With similar results being reported all over the country, there is little doubt about the importance of school-based literacy coaches.

What, then, are the characteristics of coaches who can catalyze this type of improvement?

KNOWLEDGE

Coaches must be knowledgeable in various areas of school improvement, student learning, and human nature. They must have a deep content knowledge and understand how students learn as well as have a firm grasp on complex pedagogical and social factors at play in classrooms. Effective coaches understand classroom management issues, the importance of current educational research, and the coaching process. Coaches are learners themselves, intellectually curious, always seeking solutions or a new angle to an old issue. At the same time, good coaches must take care to avoid passing along biases or advocating only instructional practices with which they are familiar or comfortable. They must provide as much information as possible, including conflicting information on a topic. The goal is for teachers to build their own ability to analyze, critique, question and use information as

they solve problems that arise in the classroom (Killion & Harrison, 1997).

Literacy coaches must have both knowledge and experience to build trust with those who will call upon them for help. Since they will be modeling lessons, facilitating pre and post coaching sessions, and providing pertinent research for specific areas of concern, they should have a vast repertoire of resources on hand to meet the individual needs of teachers and students. A strong professional library and access to a variety of professional journals are helpful for the staff—but essential for a coach. A good coach is like the proverbial “walking encyclopedia” with a ready index of relevant articles, websites, professional books and other resources to deepen learning and solve problems.

As Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison note in their article, *The Multiple Role of Staff Developers*, it may be difficult to keep current in the rapidly changing field of education, but good coaches read widely and also increase others’ capacity to gather information for themselves in the future (Killion & Harrison, 1997).

ABILITY TO FORM STRONG INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Even the most knowledgeable and experienced coach will be ineffective if he or she does not possess strong interpersonal skills. Teachers will understandably respond negatively to a coach who is critical or impatient. Building a synergistic relationship with mutual trust and respect as its foundation is a critical first step toward successful coaching. At the very least, coaches must be capable of letting go of ego, refuse to assume the title of “expert,” and see themselves as mentors rather than administrators or evaluators. Often referred to as the “guide on the side,” a coach should be the silent partner who acts as an encourager, listener, and supportive friend, giving feedback when necessary and allowing teachers time and space to think through issues. Although some teachers may be reluctant to have a coach visit in their room and may even become defensive about taking suggestions, a good coach will instinctively know when to back away and when to push for deeper thinking. As science coach Connie Roth suggests, “In the beginning, I do a lot of observation. I get a feel for how (the teachers) work

in their room and try to build a rapport before I start giving advice” (Norton, 1999). Good coaches have expertise but do not come across as experts.

ADAPTABILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

Another essential characteristic for a coach is the ability to be flexible and adaptable, skills that are difficult to learn if they are not an inherent part of the coach’s personality. The challenges coaches face each day will not always fit into a pre-determined schedule or coaching “syllabus” for the week. While coaches should never be used as substitute teachers or have other extra duties, the very nature of schools necessitates working together to solve unanticipated problems. A rigid personality will have a difficult time adapting to the various and often changing roles required of a coach. According to Killion and Harrison, the greatest challenge for a coach is to encourage adaptations of new learning. Instead of expecting replication, coaches should encourage variations and adaptations as a part of learning while helping teachers internalize new skills and apply them in daily practice (Killion & Harrison). Depending upon the need, a coach may do all of the following during any given day: plan a lesson with a teacher, co-teach, observe students, provide artifacts to make a coaching point, model a lesson, provide prompts for reflection or facilitate a pre or post lesson meeting (Feger, Woleck, & Hickman, 2004). Flexibility is the name of the coaching game.

STAFF DEVELOPER

Often the staff literacy coach is the primary staff developer, responsible for keeping the staff up to date on current literacy research and, in effect, becoming the catalyst for change. This can be one of the most demanding roles of a coach as he incorporates all of the above characteristics into a position that requires the ability to motivate entire faculties toward continuous improvement and positive change. Killion describes this role as “on the edge,” promoting and guiding analysis and reflection among members of the organization. A coach, in his role as staff developer, might pursue grant opportunities, organize workshops, present new concepts, or find affordable consultants who can work with teachers on school initiatives. As one who must initiate alternatives to current practice, he or she must be on the lookout for applicable

research and new ideas. In addition, the coach will be the school's compass, finding true North in a magnetic field of conflicting research, practices, and long-held beliefs.

COACHING POINTS

- Good coaches communicate regularly with the principal but do not take on the role of evaluator or critic. Coaches maintain the trust of the teachers by never discussing practices, personalities, or classroom issues with principals. Good coaches operate as colleagues, not administrators.
- Administrators, for their part, publicly support the coach and visit classes often to maintain the credibility of the coach.
- Coaches and teachers should concentrate on specific student achievement goals.
- Coaching takes time. To hurry the process is to invite dissension and superficial, short-term results.
- Networking among schools and with personnel from the district office is essential for building a community of learners.
- Coaching is synonymous with reflection.

CONCLUSION

Coaching, as Galm and Perry note in the article *Coaching Moves Beyond the Gym*, is difficult and not for everyone. "They (coaches) must be comfortable with conflict, resistance, and multiple demands on their time. They must be able to work in a collaborative, non-confrontational way and operate as colleagues. As leaders, they must be willing to model reflective practice for teachers and be prepared to develop expertise in their new roles" (Galm & Perry, 2004). Indeed, coaches have the privilege and responsibility of directly affecting the learning of students through the most direct of mediums—classroom teachers.

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