

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

ROLE: Catalyst for change

PURPOSE: To create disequilibrium with the current state as an impetus to explore alternatives to current practice.

BY JOELLEN KILLION AND CYNTHIA HARRISON

Seventh in an eight-part series about roles of the school-based coach

An important role for school coaches is being a catalyst for change. In this demanding role, the coach seeks to influence change for improvement by introducing new ideas, making observations, and questioning current practice. By examining how to be more effective, to move beyond the status quo, and to challenge mental mod-

els (Schon, 1987; Senge, 1990), coaches promote learning and continuous improvement throughout schools. Learning organizations are built on the premise that learning in organizations means continuously testing how people think, act, and interact (Senge, 1990; Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner, 1994). The coach, acting as a catalyst for change, often speaks the unspoken as a way of initiating conversation about alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

As catalysts for change, coaches have two major responsibilities. One is engaging teachers in “evaluation think” (Killion, 2002). Evaluation think is “individuals and teams looking critically and analytically to discover what is working and what is not in order to redefine their work and improve results” (Killion, 2002, p. 1). A second responsibility is introducing alternatives or refinements to current practices. This latter role holds an expect-

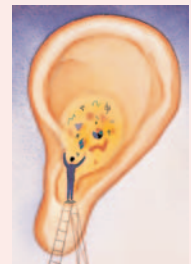


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Our goal: All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

SCENARIO:
Catalyst for change at work

It is no secret to Mildred Taylor, instructional specialist at Marlin Middle School, or the administrative team that the number of 7th-grade failures is creeping up. In the last few years, these numbers have been slowly climbing, while student performance on state tests remains relatively stable. In a meeting with 8th-grade teachers last week, Taylor heard complaints that students are not ready for the 8th-grade curriculum.

Taylor is meeting with the 7th-grade team later in the week. She thinks about how she could plant a seed. She does not want to anger teachers, yet she wants to create an awareness that might initiate their desire to act. She also wants teachers to initiate action before the principal requires action because she wants them to “own” the problem. She decides to use “evaluation think” to help teachers understand the issue.

At the meeting, Taylor facilitates a discussion among teachers using the evaluation think questions. When they begin to generate ideas about what’s not working, Taylor notices that teachers concentrate on student-centered issues such as lack of motivation, parents’ lack of value in education, students’ high absenteeism, and poor preparation for middle school. Taylor musters her courage and brings out the grade distribution results for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. “These data prove our point,” teachers respond. “Students seem to slack off when they get to 7th grade.”

“I wonder why they don’t seem to have difficulty in 6th grade,” Taylor ponders aloud.

“It’s because the 6th-grade teachers baby them,” one teacher suggests.

“Yet they seem to bounce back in 8th grade,” Taylor responds.

“I wonder why that is?” another asks.

“Are you interested in finding out why that

is?” inquires Taylor.

“Sure,” say most of the teachers, “but it seems very odd.”

Taylor brings out another data chart showing how the numbers of failures in 7th grade compare to those of other grades over the last few years. Teachers study the charts in amazement.

“These students are less prepared than students in previous years,” interjects one teacher.

“More challenging students require different instructional techniques to help them learn,” counters Taylor.

“I’m curious how your teaching has changed to accommodate the students’ changed needs.”

The grade-level chair takes up the gauntlet Taylor has thrown. “I think this is something that merits further investigation. Mildred, are you willing to help us figure this out?”

“Sure,” responds Taylor. She suggests that the team use a root cause analysis to identify potential reasons for students’ failures. She offers to lead them through the process next week when they meet again. They agree.

As Taylor leaves this meeting, she is grateful teachers want to examine the issue of failure rates. She acknowledges that the meeting could have turned out very differently, and is glad that she had the courage to raise the issue. Speaking the truth is not easy, yet Taylor knows that someone has to take the first step.

One of the 7th-grade teachers catches up with Taylor as she walks down the hall. “What you did was gutsy. This problem has been going on for a few years, and we all know about it,” he says. “We just haven’t had the courage as a group to name it out loud. I am relieved that it is finally out in the public, and that we now have permission to talk about it. It will help us stop talking about students and begin talking about teaching and learning. Thanks, Mildred.”

** Fictitious person and school*

tation that the coach is comfortable being on the leading edge, current in curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, leadership, and change.

To be successful in the role of catalyst for change, coaches model continuous improvement in their own work. They make their practice public, seek feedback from critical friends within the

school and beyond, examine their own practice, refine their own practice, think aloud (metacognition) about their work, and learn continuously from networking with other coaches, reading, and conducting action research.

One strategy coaches use frequently as catalysts for change is questioning the status quo. Coaches might ask:

T3 presents one role of the school-based coach each month.

9 roles of the school-based coach

- **Catalyst for change**
- Classroom supporter
- Curriculum specialist (T3, Feb. 2006)
- Data coach (T3, Oct. 2005)
- Instructional specialist (T3, March 2006)
- Learning facilitator (T3, Sept. 2005)
- Mentor (T3, Nov. 2005)
- Resource provider
- School leader (T3, Dec./Jan. 2006)

From
9 Roles of the School-Based Coach
by Joellen Killion and Cynthia Harrison

- How did this become our practice?
- Whose needs does it serve?
- What message does this action send to our community about our values as a school (Killion & Harrison, 1997)?

Another set of questions coaches use are the “evaluation think” questions:

- What is working?
- How do we know?
- What isn’t working?
- How do we know?
- What are we going to do about it?

Coaches in the role of catalyst for change cultivate continuous learning within their schools by questioning constantly “how their actions affect the results they observe. They regularly test basic assumptions and experiment with new ways of doing things — learning from their successes and failures so they can do better the next time” (Petrides & Nodine, p. v). The coach explores “truths” and assumptions upon which actions are based. The coach, acting as a catalyst for change, “reveals truths and identifies what is often unspoken as a way of initiating dialogue about alternative ways of behaving and thinking” (Killion & Harrison, 1997, p. 43).

Knowledge and skills

Coaches use a wide range of knowledge and skills as catalysts for change. They know and understand change, leadership, reform, context, and adult development. They use scanning and forecasting skills to be aware of national, state, and local trends that may impact education. They use creative and critical problem-solving skills. They engage others in dialogue, surfacing assumptions and identifying mental models that influence behaviors. Communication and relationship skills are essential so that their challenges of the status quo are perceived to be both positive and constructive.

Challenges

As catalysts for change, coaches face the difficulty of maintaining a delicate balance between challenging the status quo and ensuring that people are confident and competent in their work. If the coach is too critical, teachers may become resistant to continuous improvement, yet if the

coach allows teachers to become too comfortable, they may lose the desire for improvement. Another challenge is being ready to act whenever an opportunity arises. The coach maintains a laser-like focus on the vision and seeks every opportunity to move closer to the vision. This constant advocacy may irritate those who are more comfortable with constancy and certainty.

In this role, the coach walks a delicate balance between initiating a necessary change and planting a seed that allows others to perceive the need to change and to initiate the change on their own without the coach leading or owning the change. The coach strives to foster ownership in others so the aspiration to initiate, implement, and sustain the change exists within others. Coaches also seek to maintain a certain level of dissatisfaction, discomfort, or disequilibrium within the school as a way of inducing continuous improvement. A final challenge coaches have in this role is acting alone. This is dangerous because the coach’s actions may be perceived as working against the school’s plan for improvement or in opposition to the principal’s or others’ efforts.

References

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