

T3 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

How to *say it* like a coach

BY KATHY KEE

Successful coaches are educators who have a deep belief in themselves and in others to achieve and succeed beyond known parameters. This deep belief is aligned and congruent with eloquent language that champions confidence and support in

every conversation and thereby presents an opportunity for a teacher to transform her work.

Susan Scott says this so eloquently in *Fierce Conversations* (Penguin Putnam, 2002): “While no single conversation is guaranteed to transform an organization, a relationship, or a life, any single conversation can.”

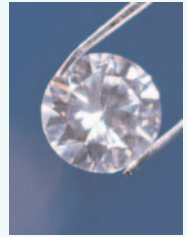
The job of a coach is to speak and listen as if this is the most important conversation you will ever have with this person.

First, believe it

As districts select new coaches, focusing on that first essential requirement — possessing an unwavering belief in another person — is often overlooked. An authentic coach believes teachers desire to be the best they can be. Because they are driven by that belief, these educators search for the treasures of talent hidden below the surface of knowledge and skills. Educators with this belief know that, with trust and a sense of safety, a teacher will willingly take the necessary steps to learn and improve.



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When entering a teacher’s classroom, coaches are required to respect the background, prior training, and even the prior levels of supervision given over months or even years. When a new coach arrives with the news that they are there to help the teacher use new strategies and tools, the teacher’s immediate response is to interpret that news as one of the following:

- “So they don’t think I’m a good teacher.”
- “Does this mean that all these years I was a bad teacher?”
- “I’ve been doing this longer than that person has been out of diapers, what do they mean?”
- “Here we go again, something else that will last for a few months.”

The message is usually interpreted as “what I have been doing is wrong.” The listener hears two seemingly contradicting messages of ‘stop doing this’ and ‘start doing this.’ Skilled language and an intention to support educators as they modify and adjust to potentially new strategies

becomes a dance of building rapport and trust while communicating respect for where a teacher is or has been while on the journey to new and promising practices.

Cognitive CoachingSM uses the metaphor of a stagecoach as a vehicle “to take a person from where they are to where they want to be.” This conveys the belief that all teachers want the best knowledge and skills for their students. The coach must never forget that teachers chose this profession in the hopes of making a difference in the lives of students. Teachers and educators want to support students to be the best they can be. Teachers do their best to support students against pretty big odds. Consequently, educators who support teachers must believe equally in their colleagues. An authentic coach will reconnect to when they were teaching and recall what they had to do when encountering a challenging student. They will remember how they searched for new knowledge and skills, considered the interest or special skills of the student, how they

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- She serves on the board of directors for Coaching School Results, Inc; is a national trainer for the Center for Cognitive Coaching, Downey Walk Through for Reflective Practice; Powerful Strategies for Living & Leading; Powerful Coaching Strategies; and the Language of Supervision with colleague, John Crain.

- Before becoming a national consultant, Kee was assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in a suburban Dallas, Texas, school district.

The job of a coach is to speak and listen as if this is the most important conversation you will ever have with this person.

1. The authentic coach uses language that sends a message of belief and possibility.

“As you consider your goals for your students this year, what are your greatest wishes and dreams for them?”

2. The coach withholds personal opinions or judgments and asks questions that will support the teacher to think deeply about his or her practice.

“Thank you for asking but I believe the resolution to the situation lies with your knowledge, experience, and beliefs. When you were in this situation before, what guided you to a successful outcome?”

3. The coach talks with the teacher about the data and mediates the teacher’s own assessment of what new decisions or directions are needed. “As you examine your data sources, what did you determine were your strongest areas and which areas will you target to get the desired results?”

4. The coach stands solidly with the teacher as he or she discovers new pathways and strategies for students.

“You said the way you taught the targeted objectives did not get the results you desired. So, as you consider new options, what do you think might be your next course of action?”

5. The coach vows to speak the truth about data and labels opinion, points of view, and optional ideas. Susan Scott says, “The success of our relationships depends on our ability to understand each other and be truthful with each other.”

“Are the results you’re getting meeting your high standards as well as those of your campus?”

6. The coach always demonstrates the belief in the teacher.

“Given your students and their needs, what decisions or options are you considering that will accomplish your goals?”



had to differentiate for the student among others with so many needs. Now as a authentic coach, they will personalize and differentiate for the teachers they serve. Why? Because it is vital to believe that all teachers want to do their best for students, even if they may have actions or behaviors that are contradictory.

Second, express it

Language is the second most essential skill for a coach. Language that aligns with the deep belief in teachers who are being served and supported is crucial to building trust and rapport. Language can build trust or bust the bank account. Language can build a relationship that communicates, “I care about you as a teacher and I want to do whatever you need to shine as an exceptional teacher.”

An authentic coach knows deeply the truth in Mother Teresa’s reflection that, “I don’t care how much you know, until I know how much you care.”

To demonstrate that caring in an initial conversation with a teacher, an authentic coach might say:

- “It is such a pleasure to be in your classroom. I see your diploma on the wall. You must be proud to be in the group of graduates who always are such wonderfully trained teachers.”
- “Hello my name is Kathy. I am so honored to serve as the literacy coach for your campus. I hear you are a new grandmother, like me. I’ll show you my pictures, if you’ll show me yours!”
- “Hello, my name is Kathy. I will be serving as the math coach for the campus. I have heard so many wonderful things about your leadership in math on the campus. Tell me about the great things you have been doing.”

An authentic coach uses language that communicates the deep alignment of his or her personal belief in the teacher’s desire to do a good job, to plan, to organize, to think through thoroughly, and to serve students. While coaches may have good intentions, frequently they may use language that sends a different message. Think about the deep messages of such common questions as:

- “Have you been using the literacy strategies we talked about?”
- “Do you have any goals for your students?”
- “Have you thought about using technology?”
- “Do you have a discipline plan in your classroom?”
- “Are you using the curriculum regularly?”
- “When do you plan to get started on small group instruction?”
- “Do you know any other ways to teach besides whole group?”

The above language is far too frequent and common. The sad part is that most coaches initially don’t see anything wrong with the questions. But all of the questions above send an unconscious message that “I don’t think you do.” When that message is received, a teacher interprets that as, “If they think I’m not so good, then why should I bother to be.”

The power of the authentic coach is knowing that language and belief must align to develop and create trust. Turning each negative assumption into a positive one sends an important message to the teacher that says, “I know you have good things happening in your classroom.”

- “What literacy strategies generate the most excitement for your students?”
- “What goals are your students achieving that evoke the most pride for you?”
- “What technology best supports and accelerates your students’ success?”
- “In what ways is your discipline plan directly impacting your students’ achievement?”
- “In what ways have the curriculum guides assisted you in organizing and bundling your objectives for pacing instruction?”
- “What successful results do you see in your small group instruction?”
- “What instructional strategies produce the highest achievement for all of your students?”

If you want the best from teachers, then speak to them as if they are doing their best — or that you want them to. We must believe they have done the thinking, planning, or action and with a nobility of purpose — and speak to them with that message in our words. ♦



Negative messages

- Do you have any goals for your students?
- Have you thought about using technology?
- Do you have a discipline plan in your classroom?

These send an unconscious message: **YOU’RE NOT DOING IT RIGHT.**

Resources

Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools, by Art Costa and Robert Garmston. Christopher-Gordon, 2002.

Fierce Conversations, by Susan Scott. Penguin Putnam, 2002.

Falling Awake, by David Ellis. Breakthrough Enterprises, 2000.