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Coaches lead in everything they do

Coaches are teachers at heart and leaders of change. They serve as both formal and informal leaders in their schools. As leaders, they stand side-by-side with their school administrators shaping improvement strategies and supporting classroom practices designed to improve student learning. In their role as leaders, coaches engage in results-driven, goal-focused work.

As formal leaders, coaches chair committees, facilitate teams, contribute to decision making, and act as teacher leaders. They may, for example, chair school improvement teams or co-chair teams with the principal or other colleagues. They may facilitate standing committees within the school, such as the professional development committee, lead curriculum teams, such as the school's literacy team, or head task forces, such as those undertaking special projects within the school. As designated leaders, coaches use their leadership skills to help others stay results focused. As a formal leader within the school, a coach may find that she walks a fine line between administrator and teacher.

As informal leaders, coaches lead by example with their attitudes and behaviors. What they say and do convey their beliefs about any aspect of the education system. Other teachers look to coaches for indicators about how to respond to innovation or decisions. For example, if a district adopts new mathematics curriculum, teachers' response may mirror the coach's. When a coach focuses his interactions and support on services that align with school goals and not on other areas, he sends an unspoken message about the importance of the goals and his commitment to achieve them. His actions communicate to colleagues that the goals are worthy of his energy and effort. As informal leaders, coaches often have a very powerful influence on their col-

leagues.

As leaders within their schools, whether formal or informal, coaches contribute to the culture of the school. Through their actions, they reveal their mental models, the beliefs that influence their actions. For example, how a coach approaches an improvement effort reveals what a coach believes about the school's potential to improve. If a coach approaches improvement from a deficit approach — for example, “We have a problem here and what we are currently doing is not working” — she may create resistance from teachers who have been working very hard and who feel as if all their work has been discredited or not appreciated. These teachers may not enroll in the change effort and may even act to subvert the effort.

However, if a coach chooses an asset-based or success-based approach to change, he may convey his belief in the knowledge and skill of his colleagues. By beginning with the strengths of the school or staff and moving toward the staff's vision or dream, the coach builds on what already exists, engages teachers in recognition and appreciation of their successes, and supports them in identifying where they want to go next. Authors Doug Krug and Ed Oakley in their book, *Enlightened Leadership: Getting to the Heart of Change* (Fireside, 1991), offered a simple yet powerful approach to change that uses the principle of strength-based change. Their approach includes four steps in the form of questions:

- What are our successes?



LEADERSHIP

Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

- What contributes to those successes? What are we doing to achieve them?
 - Where do we want to go from here?
 - How will we get there? What will we do?
- By working from strengths instead of deficits, assets instead of problems, coaches empower teachers rather than demoralize them. They infuse a can-do attitude in their colleagues. They acknowledge and appreciate rather than criticize. They assume positive intention rather than lack of professionalism. Building on assets rather than deficits has a powerful impact on teachers' morale, dedication, and effort. When they feel respected, appreciated, and professional, teachers are more likely to work toward the school's goals than when they feel disrespected, underappreciated, or unprofessional.

Coaches contribute to creating a trusting and blame-free environment within the school. How they use data with teachers, for example, is one way coaches model their beliefs. If the data analysis protocol begins with identifying deficits rather than successes, teachers may feel unsafe and blamed for their students' poor performance. They may even feel that they are being singled out. On the other hand, if the use of data begins with student successes, teachers are more likely to move naturally from what worked to what didn't and take responsibility for the results.

Creating a forum for dialogue, healthy conflict, and consensus is another way coaches shape the school's culture as either a formal or informal leader. Coaches can create a safe haven in which teachers can express their perceptions, identify their assumptions, and state their point of view. When teachers feel that their opinions or ideas do not matter, they become disenfranchised. When given a voice in decision making, either by offering input to shape the decision or making the decision collaboratively, teachers are more com-

mitted to the success of the decision and work actively to support implementation.

Coaches can also protect teachers from unnecessary or unimportant issues. Schools are centers for change. Schools frequently have multiple initiatives or innovations occurring simultaneously. Daily external pressures or special interests act to derail improvement efforts in schools. Coaches, working in partnership with principals, actively work to keep away distracters. Distracters may come in the form of a new initiative that is not aligned to the school's goal or a special interest. Coaches frequently make difficult decisions to ignore opportunities that may be seductively attractive in favor of that which will make a difference in the goal area.

A coach's most important leadership role is supporting instructional improvement. In their interactions with teachers, coaches continuously focus on instruction that improves student learning. Coaches help teachers use data to plan instruction, reflect on instruction, and revise lesson design so that all classroom practice meets the needs of all students. Coaches provide a variety of services that focus on instructional improvement including doing demonstration lessons, co-teaching, observing and offering feedback, conducting walk-throughs, facilitating examination of student work, or offering more formal professional development.

Coaches, whether in formal or informal leadership roles within their school, act as leaders in everything they do. They continuously guide, shape, mold, and influence others through their actions and attitudes.

What they do and believe contributes to what others do and believe. Coaches work hand-in-hand with their principals to create a results-driven school culture that fosters teacher excellence so that all students learn. ♦

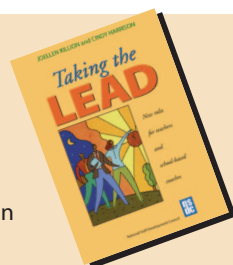
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