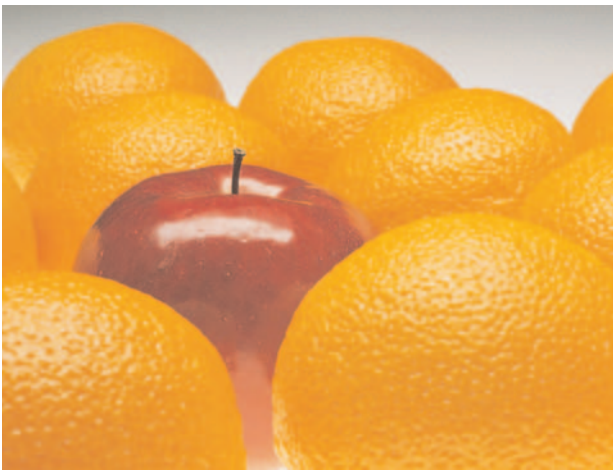


# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## Separating **coaching** from **supervising**



BY CATHY A. TOLL

**I** work with literacy coaches all over the United States. These coaches are employed by their schools or districts to support teacher growth in literacy instruction. As a coach of literacy coaches, I can predict many of the questions that I will be asked because certain topics in coaching are common across sites. Among these questions are a number related to coaching and supervision.

Typical questions include:

- How can I convince teachers that I'm not working with them as a supervisor?
- How often should I report to the principal and how much should I tell her?
- What should I do if my principal wants me to tell him which teachers are not doing a good job?
- What should I do when I see something "bad" happening in a classroom? If I tell the principal, the teachers won't trust me.

At the core of such questions are two issues:

Coaching duties sometimes look similar to duties performed by supervisors;

Coaches need to maintain teachers' trust while having good communication with the supervisor (Lyons & Pinnell, 2001; Toll, 2005).

Let's explore these issues. First, though, I'd like to provide my definitions of "coach" and "supervisor." The definitions pertain specifically to work with teachers.

**Coach:** One who helps teachers to recognize what they know and can do, assists teachers as they strengthen their

### WHAT'S INSIDE

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Coaches march in the lead positions.

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#### NSDC tool

This can nail down an agreement between a coach and a principal.

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#### NSDC profile

Kathy Spruiell, above, and Christy LeMaster multiply math education.

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ability to make more effective use of what they know and do, and supports teachers as they learn more and do more.

**Supervisor:** One who ensures that teachers meet the requirements of their positions at a satisfactory level and continue to do so over time.

I've given these definitions a good deal of thought. I have chosen to describe a coach in positive terms rather than ones that would indicate a coach's duties in finding problems or helping underperforming teachers to do better jobs. This choice reflects my belief that coaching builds on strengths and that, while coaches may work with problem situations, they don't necessarily do so.

The definition above does not preclude working with problem situations — they certainly can arise as a coach "assists teachers in strengthening their ability to make more effective use of what they know and do," as well as when a coach "supports teachers as they learn more and do more."

I've phrased the definition of a supervisor in a similarly positive manner. In addition, I've indicated that supervisors want to ensure that teachers do their work satisfactorily not only in the present but also in the future. The inclusion of "over time" in the definition indicates that growth, not stasis, is a goal of supervision. I included another word, "satisfactory," with a great deal of thought. There are many teachers whose work is better than satisfactory, and there are many supervisors who want above satisfactory work. I'd suggest, though, that when supervisors assist teachers in moving beyond satisfactory performance, they are really coaching, according to the definitions above. In addition, when supervisors assist teachers in continuing satisfactory performance over time, they may do some coaching as defined above, or they may continue to use supervisory strategies.

The examples in Figure 1 on this page illustrate the potential overlap between coaching and supervising in a principal's duties. The difference is subtle but important: When one is coaching, one is responding to another's needs, values, and perceptions. Yes, a coach will provide her own perspective as well, but the teacher directs the content of the conversation. In supervising, the

Figure 1

**DRAWING A DISTINCTION  
BETWEEN SUPERVISING AND COACHING**

**Example 1**  
PRINCIPAL SUPERVISING  
ONLY

**Principal to third-year teacher:** You have been really successful in getting your students interested in reading! Your classroom is full of interesting books, and the parents are involved, too. I know this was a goal you've been working on — congratulations on your success. Now, how do you plan to maintain the students' motivation to read?

- *In this case, the principal follows an observation that the teacher met his goal with a question to direct the teacher to a further goal.*



**Example 2**  
PRINCIPAL SUPERVISING  
AND COACHING

**Principal to third-year teacher:** You have been really successful in getting your students interested in reading! Your classroom is full of interesting books, and the parents are involved, too. What is your next goal for your literacy instruction?

- *In this case, the principal follows an observation that the teacher met his goal with a question to get the teacher to think about what else he may want to address about his work.*



supervisor may listen to and respect another's needs, values, and perceptions, but the supervisor directs the content of the conversation.

The reverse can also occur. A coach may slip into a supervisory role. Examples in Figure 2 on p. 3 exemplify the potential for such an overlap. In the first case, the coach responds to the teacher in a nonjudgmental manner and asks an inquiring question to help the teacher solve the problem. In the second case, the coach tells the teacher what to do.

**About the author**

- Cathy Toll, a former teacher, reading specialist, and principal, is chair of elementary teacher education at Indiana University School of Education at IUPUI.
- She has worked extensively with literacy coaches and their leaders throughout the United States and also served as director of literacy research and development at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory.
- She is founder of The Professional Learning Group, a thought collaborative dedicated to re-visioning teacher professional growth.
- You can continue this conversation by e-mailing [ctoll@iupui.edu](mailto:ctoll@iupui.edu).

Figure 2

**DEMONSTRATING THE POTENTIAL FOR OVERLAP BETWEEN SUPERVISING AND COACHING**

**Example 3**

**COACH COACHING ONLY**

**Coach to 9th-grade English**

**teacher:** At this point in the school year, it may be helpful to look back at your students' cumulative writing

folders to look at the samples you've collected.

**Teacher:** Oh! I forgot to collect samples all year!

**Coach:** Hmmmm ...

**Teacher:** I have had the students write like crazy but because I'm new to this school, I forgot to put them in the cumulative folder.

**Coach:** What could you do now?



**Example 4**

**COACH COACHING AND SUPERVISING**

**Coach to 9th-grade**

**English teacher:** At this point in the school year, it may be helpful to look back at your students' cumulative writing folders to look at the samples you've collected.

**Teacher:** Oh! I forgot to collect samples all year!

**Coach:** You're supposed to collect three of them. You need to see your department chair about this one.



Supervisors who act as coaches are rarely blundering, unless they are failing to perform their supervisory roles as well. However, coaches who slip into supervisory roles are usually making a mistake, often a serious mistake. Successful coaching depends upon trust between teachers and coaches (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Sweeney, 2003); if the teacher believes the coach is a supervisor, that trust may be jeopardized. In addition,

when a coach becomes directive, the teacher may feel that his needs or concerns are not the focus of attention (Flaherty, 1998). Finally, coaching is new to the culture of many schools, and staff members often feel suspicious about claims that the coach is there to help. In such situations, when a coach behaves like a supervisor, even subtly, those suspicions flare and the entire coaching endeavor is compromised.

For coaching to be successful, it must be separated from supervision. Coaches and supervisors can practice a number of strategies to make this possible.

**Tips for coaches**

1. Separate yourself from the performance assessment of teachers. Do not participate in any aspect of others' performance assessment process.
2. If you see a supervisory matter, trust that the supervisor will see it, too. That's the supervisor's job — leave it up to her to take care of it. (Exceptions occur in cases where children are being endangered or where the coach needs to protect himself.)
3. Communicate with supervisors in a neutral manner.
  - Provide a written summary of coaching meetings — individual and group — to those involved and to the principal routinely. Develop a one-page form that includes the names of participants, date of meeting, topics discussed, goals set, and action steps. Plans for the next meeting could also be included. *This information needs to be reported in a factual manner, emphasizing only positive steps taken and avoiding any statements of judgment.*
  - Summarize coaching activities as a whole (or by grade level or department, if there are great differences in the work you do among such groups). This summary might include the number of individual coaching sessions, group coaching sessions, demonstration lessons, and other duties performed by a coach. Don't mention teachers' names. Give a copy to all staff members.
  - Consider having a coach's advisory team with a broad range of representation that will help you evaluate the coaching *process* (not you or your colleagues) and report on the process to

See Page 8 for a tool for developing a partnership agreement between a coach and a principal.

Coaches who slip into supervisory roles are usually making a mistake, often a serious mistake.

supervisors and staff.

4. In difficult situations with teachers, you can avoid acting like a supervisor while taking steps to move ahead.
  - Ask a peer (teacher or coach) to sit in on a meeting and provide feedback as a critical friend. If you can, ask the teacher with whom you are working to agree to this and even to set it up.
  - Discuss with the teacher your concern and asking how to move beyond it. Focus on observable behaviors and your responses (not your guess about why the teacher is resisting, nor what you think the teacher is thinking/feeling).
  - Work with that teacher one-on-one rather than in a group, which will lessen the negative influence on others.
  - Invite the teacher to take a leadership role in sharing successful practices or leading a study group (a risk – this could backfire).
  - Discuss the matter with the teacher’s supervisor if you and the supervisor can be sure that the other will not in any way reveal to others that the conversation took place. (Do this rarely and only as a last resort.)
5. If a supervisor tells you that a teacher needs your help in improving performance to the satisfactory level, politely tell the supervisor that you’ll wait for the teacher to approach you about the matter and then you’ll be glad to help. (You may need to respectfully remind the supervisor about the need for a coach to avoid supervisory duties, and point out that, if you approach the teacher, you will be acting as the representative of the supervisor.)
6. If a supervisor repeatedly asks you to perform activities that are supervisory in nature, ask for assistance in clarifying your role from the director of literacy or the director of coaching in your school district.

#### Tips for supervisors

1. If you believe that a teacher you are supervising needs to work with the literacy coach in order to improve performance to a satisfactory level:
  - Place responsibility in the hands of the teacher, not the coach, to initiate the coaching conversation. Avoid telling the coach that the

teacher needs help and expecting the coach to approach the teacher. Ensure that the teacher knows the remediation effort is her responsibility and that the coach will be available to help.

- Ask the teacher to outline who will do what in the improvement process.
  - Ask the teacher to provide notes of his work with the coach (don’t ask the coach to do this).
2. Meet regularly with the coach, and be aware of coaching activities in general. Learn about the nature of the coach’s work, including areas of success and struggle, without asking about specific supervisory problems.
  3. If the coach broaches the topic of a particular teacher, ask whether the teacher should be the one sharing the information with the supervisor.
  4. Don’t require the coach to “report” on individual teachers.
  5. Don’t share confidential supervisory information with the coach.

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#### FOR THE COACH:

**If a supervisor repeatedly asks you to perform activities that are supervisory in nature, ask for assistance in clarifying your role from the director of literacy or the director of coaching in your school district.**

#### FOR THE SUPERVISOR:

**If the coach broaches the topic of a particular teacher, ask whether the teacher should be the one sharing the information with the supervisor.**

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