

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

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## Conversations can kick off the coaching

By Jim Knight

**H**ow do you get teachers on board for coaching? Simply hanging out your shingle or sending teachers an e-mail about the new coach in the building is unlikely to get the reaction you want.

Instructional coaches and other professional developers affiliated with the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning have learned the value of conducting one-to-one interviews with teachers to introduce coaching in schools. Sue Woodruff, a leader of professional developers from Muskegon, Mich., observes that “interviews provide teachers a chance to see you not as ... some expert coming in, but as someone like them ... it’s not ‘I’m better than you,’ or ‘I’m going to come tell you something.’ It’s ‘we’re going to have a conversation.’”

### The benefits of interviews

Interviews help coaches achieve at least three goals.

First, interviews help coaches gather specific information about teacher and administrative challenges, student needs, and cultural norms specific to a school. Coaches can use this information to tailor coaching sessions and other professional learning to the unique needs of teachers, administrators, and students.

Second, interviews enable coaches to educate participants about the philosophy, methods, and opportunities offered by coaching. Professional learning is tricky, and effective coaches have to communicate that they authentically respect, value, and believe in their collaborating teachers at the same time that they motivate those teachers to move forward and change. If a teacher feels her identity is threatened by a coach, she likely will not engage in coaching. For that reason, coaches should

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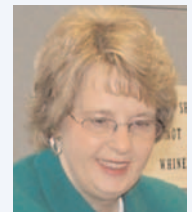
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explain their partnership approach to coaching, listen to teacher concerns, and explain that coaches are there to help, not to evaluate.

Third, interviews enable coaches to establish rapport and one-to-one relationships with teachers. When coaches listen authentically, empathize, communicate respect, and validate the concerns of teachers they interview, they can build a vitally important connection with those teachers. LaVonne Holmgren, a Topeka, Kan., coach, has found that “after the interview, people feel like you genuinely care about them — that’s the beginning of the relationship.”

### **How should one-to-one interviews be conducted?**

Interviews are effective when they last at least 30 minutes, and more effective when they can be longer (generally, up to one planning period per interview). Longer interviews allow more time to learn about each person’s burning issues, and provide more time to build a relationship. However, a great deal can be accomplished during 15-minute interviews.

Whenever possible, interviews should be conducted one-to-one. The experience of coaches around the country has shown that a 15-minute one-to-one interview is a more effective way to build relationships than a two-hour focus group session with a school team. This is partly because people tend to comment in ways that are consistent with the cultural norms of their group when they are speaking in a group (Schein, 1992). People talking one-to-one, on the other hand, are more candid. Since effective coaching may involve overcoming negative or even toxic cultural norms, creating a setting where teachers can step outside their culture and speak frankly is important.

Explaining the importance of one-to-one interviews, Luanne Todd, a coach from Golden, Colo., said, “When you talk with groups of teachers, the individual voice gets masked. Teachers don’t always say what they want to say, so privacy is essential.”

### **Scheduling interviews**

One of the easiest ways to schedule interviews is to conduct them during teachers’ planning time. Usually, an administrative assistant in

the school or a department chair can set up a schedule. Sometimes, the coach is responsible for setting up the interviews. Whoever draws up the schedule must communicate two messages. First, they must ensure that the people who will be interviewed know when and where their interview will be. Second, they must communicate that the interview is simply an opportunity for the coach to learn more about everyone’s unique teaching situation so that the coach can differentiate coaching to best meet the needs of each teacher and student in the school.

Many coaches schedule interviews informally over the first few weeks of the school year. They may send a memo or newsletter informing teachers of their goal to meet and learn from everyone. Then, they can meet each teacher in the hallway, staff lounge, or classroom to schedule meetings.

An important first step for coaches is to get a copy of the school’s staffing schedule so that they will know when teachers might be free for a brief conversation and eventually for an interview.

### **Recording what teachers say**

During the interview, coaches need to record what they hear, but do it in a way that doesn’t interfere with their ability to listen and respond to the teacher being interviewed.

Note taking is a good way to gather information, but it makes it difficult for coaches to maintain eye contact.

We have found tape-recording interviews to be an excellent strategy since it frees coaches to focus their attention on the conversation rather than note taking. Tapes also provide a way for coaches to revisit what was said, and some professional developers play their tapes in their car tape deck to stay in touch with the issues the teachers face and the feelings they experience. Most teachers accept the tape recorder as a necessary tool so long as the coach is clear that the interview is confidential. However, if a teacher doesn’t want to be recorded, the coach should put away the machine.

Sometimes, the best strategy is simply to sit and listen, and then make detailed notes after the interview.

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**MORE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**Questions about teachers' current realities**

- Describe a typical day on the job.
- What do you really like about your job?
- What kinds of pressures are you facing?
- What challenges are you facing?
- What kinds of changes are you experiencing?

**Questions about students' current realities**

- Tell me about your students.
- What are the major needs of your students?
- What would most help your students?
- What outcomes are you striving for with your students?
- How many students are you teaching each day?
- How many students with various disabilities do you teach?
- What could have a significant influence on the happiness and success of your students?

**Questions about the school's current reality**

- Describe the relationship between special education teachers and general education teachers in your school.
- Describe the relationship between senior high school teachers and junior high school teachers in this district?

**Questions about changes being experienced**

- How has your job changed over the past five years?
- How has your philosophy changed over the past five years?

**Questions about instructional practices**

- Are you teaching (name of intervention) at this point?
- If yes, which (intervention) are you teaching?
- What modifications, if any, have you made in your teaching of (intervention)?

**Questions about a desired future**

- What changes in your school would have the greatest influence on your students' success?
- Describe the ideal school.
- What would you like to change about your job?

**Questions about professional development**

- Talk about the kinds of professional development you've experienced in the past few years.
- What have you liked about your professional development?
- What have you not liked about your professional development?

**Questions to ask**

We have found four questions that are particularly effective at generating meaningful conversation between the teacher and coach:

1. What are the rewards you experience as a teacher?
2. What are your professional goals and what obstacles interfere with your ability to achieve your professional goals?
3. What are your students' strengths and weaknesses?
4. What kinds of professional learning are most/least effective for you?

When coaches have more time to conduct interviews, they can broaden or focus the scope of their questions depending on the nature of the professional learning they offer. (See more interview questions above.)

**Letting teachers have the conversation**

During one-to-one interviews, coaches have a chance to make many bids for emotional connection with participants (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Coaches can share stories, laugh and

empathize, offer positive comments, discuss personal issues, and listen with great care. Listening authentically is especially important. As Susan Scott correctly points out (2002), "if you want to have conversations that further individuals and organizations, then ... don't take the conversation away from the other person ... this practice of taking the conversation away from other people and making it about ourselves goes on all day, every day, and is a huge relationship killer and a waste of time. Nothing useful happens here ..." (p. 117).

To let teachers "have the conversation," coaches would be wise to follow Marshall Goldsmith's deceptively simple advice. Goldsmith (2007) explains that "listening is a two-part maneuver. There's the part where we actually listen. And there's the part where we speak. Speaking establishes how we are perceived as a listener" (p.148). When we listen, Goldsmith suggests, we should "listen with respect," that is, "every fiber" of our being should focus on hearing what the other person is saying, and communicate that she is important and has our entire

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attention. Second, Goldsmith suggests, before responding to others' comments, coaches should pause and reflect about their own response, asking "is it worth it?" Goldsmith explains that "people's opinions of our listening ability are largely shaped by the decisions we make immediately after asking, 'is it worth it?' Do we speak or shut up? Do we argue or simply say, 'Thank you?' Do we add our needless two cents or bite our tongue? Do we rate the comments or simply acknowledge them?" (p. 151). As former Topeka coach Shelly Kampschroeder has observed, "There's a certain amount of natural defensiveness on the part of any audience. We can get around much of that defensiveness when we show that we care enough to listen to their concerns."

**Asking teachers to commit: Contracting**

The most important outcome of the interview is for teachers to commit to coaching. Many coaches in business and education refer to this as contracting.

When explaining what they do or have to offer, coaches must avoid acting like high-pressure salespersons. The coach's goal is not to pressure someone into working with them. Rather, the coach's goal should be to collaborate with the teacher to identify teaching techniques, strategies, or other tools that might help the teacher with the most pressing challenges he is facing in the classroom. The interview questions mentioned above frequently open up this kind of discussion. For example, when a coach asks about goals and obstacles and learns that a teacher is struggling to complete plans for several courses, the coach can offer to share a powerful tool for planning lessons. Similarly, when a teacher says that she is worried about her students' poor organizational skills, a coach can propose an organizing strategy that might help students be better learners. The coach's goal is to respond to each teacher's concerns with a useful tool.

**Conclusion**

Like so many aspects of coaching, enrolling teachers is a complicated interpersonal challenge. To attract teachers' attention, more than anything else coaches need to communicate their deep respect for teachers. We have found that one way

to accomplish this goal is to conduct one-to-one interviews. When coaches take the time to sit, listen, empathize, and validate, their actions speak much louder than PowerPoint™ presentations, e-mails, newsletters, or the testimonies of others. To communicate respect and support, coaches need to show respect and support. Interviews are one way they can accomplish that.

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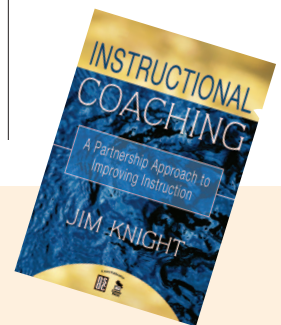
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**Also by Jim Knight**

*a Plus Option membership benefit*

**N**SDC members who have added the Plus Option to their membership package will receive *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction* by Jim Knight in April.

"Inservices" rarely supply enough support for teachers to implement new, complex change initiatives. In contrast, instructional coaching is a research-based, job-embedded approach to instructional intervention that provides the assistance and encouragement necessary to implement new programs that improve learning.

Knight describes the nuts and bolts of instructional coaching and explains the essential skills that

instructional coaches need, including getting teachers on board, providing model lessons, observing teachers, and engaging in reflective conversations.

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