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Fit the strategy to the learner

NSDC's Learning standard includes several key components. First, adults learn in different ways. An additional idea is that learning is change. Last, learning is a social process. As coaches interact with teachers, they use the Learning standard to shape the nature and the content of every conversation.

Successful coaches enter each coaching interaction with some fundamental choices. One choice is the stance they take in relationship to the teacher they are coaching. In *Mentoring Matters* (MiraVia, 2001), Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman describe three approaches to mentoring: consulting, collaborating, and coaching. Each approach is a choice a coach makes. In this article, I will use the terms expert, peer, and facilitator to describe the three stances a coach may take.

The stance may be one of expert to novice; peer to peer; or coach to teacher.

In the first stance — expert to novice — the coach has confidence that he or she has knowledge and/or skills teachers do not have. The goal of this interaction is to develop a teacher's competence, capability, and confidence and to develop his or her knowledge or skills. In other words, the coach acts as a teacher.

In the second stance — peer to peer — the coach is a peer who works alongside his or her colleague. In this interaction, peers learn together, each developing and applying knowledge and skills to refine practice and sharing with one another what they are learning as they apply their learning. In this stance, the peers may offer one another feedback or jointly solve problems related to implementation of the new learning.

In the third stance — coach to teacher — the coach is a facilitator who guides teachers as they reflect on and self-analyze their practice. In this

interaction, the coach helps teachers gain increased consciousness about their practice to understand more deeply their decision-making processes, and encourages them to explore how variations in their practice influence how students learn.

Coaches select a stance based on teachers' needs and the goals of the interaction. One challenge coaches have is to maintain flexibility about which stance to take and to resist the easy role of being the expert. Coaches become coaches because they are master teachers. They have demonstrated their expertise and have credibility with their peers. It would be easy to destroy that credibility if coaches acted as if they have the one right answer or one right way to teach. This is particularly difficult when teachers, glad to have support and eager to refine their instructional skills, seek advice from a coach, asking the coach what he or she would recommend in a particular situation. This might be an appropriate approach for a coach in some situations, but it could provoke ill will in others. Coaches might begin with a facilitator stance before moving to an expert stance.

Selecting a stance allows the coaches to identify an instructional approach to coaching.

EXPERT: As an expert, the coach uses a direct instruction model. The coach shares the rationale for the learning, grounds it in the teacher's experience, gives examples, models the learning, guides the teacher as she or he practices using the



LEARNING
Staff development that improves the learning of all students applies knowledge about human learning and change.

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learning in the classroom, and then offers opportunities for reteaching or extending the learning. If a coach works with a novice teacher, for example, who does not have an array of strategies for differentiating instruction for students who read substantially below grade level, the coach could convey to the teacher the importance of employing instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students; share several strategies for differentiating a lesson; model the strategies; observe the teacher as he uses the strategies in his classroom; offer feedback; and, as the teacher demonstrates competence with these strategies, share ways to differentiate assessment, assignments, and/or instructional materials, all while holding students to the same rigorous content standards.

PEER: In the peer stance, the coach invites teachers interested in learning about differentiation to join with him in a learning team. The coach schedules a time for teachers to gather, brings some possible resources including books and videos for their collaborative investigation to the first meeting, asks teachers to explore their assumptions about teachers' responsibilities related to student learning, and engages teachers in a discussion about the importance of differentiation. The coach coordinates the team as they develop a plan of action for learning about differentiation. He is the first to volunteer to demonstrate a strategy for several team members in one teacher's classroom and asks the observers to give him feedback on the lesson. He covers one teacher's class while she observes another teacher. He works with individual team members or pairs to design lessons that include differentiation. He observes and gives teachers feedback about their use of differentiation strategies. He seeks support from the principal to buy instructional resources to use with non-readers that will help them meet the standards.

FACILITATOR: As a facilitator, the coach meets with individual teachers or small groups to explore their understanding of differentiation, their strategies for differentiation, how those practices impact student learning, and ways to refine their current practices. His goal is to raise teachers' consciousness about how they think

about and use differentiation in their classrooms, their ability to analyze their practice based on its impact on student learning, and their capacity to think about their thinking. He meets with teachers as they plan instruction and asks teachers to be aware of the decisions they make and to share their rationale for their decisions. He asks reflective questions that promote thoughtful examination of practice, encourages teachers to come together with samples of student work to more deeply understand the impact of teachers' work on student work. In addition to asking teachers to examine the practical reasons for their decisions, he asks them to consider the theoretical and moral rationale for their decisions.

When coaches recognize that they have options (*different ways*) about their stance for coaching, they can be flexible and adjust their approach to coaching to meet the needs (*change*) of their clients and their goals. They engage teachers in conversations (*social interaction*) to promote collaborative interaction about teaching and learning. A coach's mission is to improve teaching and student learning. As such, the coach views his or her work as promoting learning among both teachers and their students. ♦

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