

THREE SIMPLE SECRETS OF SCHOOL-BASED COACHING

Written on a sticky note stuck to the edge of my laptop are three phrases: Listen first; teach by example; be patient. These are three things I've learned as a school-based literacy coach. My notes on these simple but essential guidelines are a scaffold for the coaching I do.

I wonder how coaches who are flung into this adult learning role without much preparation deal with the reactions of the teachers with whom they work. Many of us who coach have enduring memories of our first interactions with classroom teachers; indeed, our first early struggles are about as easy to forget as a bad case of stomach flu. Why, then, do so many education decision makers easily

accept the idea that there exists a superhuman race whose members can walk into a classroom the very first day and “take on” the role of a coach without any guidance or even basic training?

A number of unique coaching experiences have strongly influenced how I see the role of a school-based coach: Title VII resource teacher for a program for Cambodian students

in grades K-3; demonstrating teaching techniques for English language learners in four schools; Spanish bilingual literacy coach for grades K-3; demonstrating small-group instruction in individual classrooms; standards coach in a middle school; literacy specialist/coach for 5th graders at an elementary school. For five years, I have worked with teachers to implement best practices for students at risk of retention.

As a coach, the first question to ask is, “What doesn't work?” A clear danger for any coach is to see herself as an expert. While expertise is probably what helps you get the job, showing off that expertise is a surefire way to get into trouble immediately. Spending time talking with teachers and asking about their needs and how you can help them help their students reaps big rewards for a coach. That was the first lesson I learned. Preparing materials requested by

teachers, photocopying, finding resources online and in libraries — these are the things teachers need immediately.

What else doesn't work? Thinking that there's only one way to teach a lesson — my way — has gotten many coaches off on the wrong foot. Teaching is a private enterprise. First, we have to get in the door.

I begin by offering to help — more like a teaching assistant. I've carried water for science experiments, sharpened pencils for writing workshops, and handed out books and other materials, all in the name of building a trusting relationship. Trust makes a coaching relationship possible.

Once trust develops, a coach can begin modeling instruction. It can be a team teaching approach, a demonstration of something a teacher requests, or a coach asking to try a strategy or technique with the class. I think of it as the “inch-at-a-time” approach. Trying to go too fast can have dire consequences on teacher/coach relationships.

In coaching, things just don't happen quickly. It takes time to build credibility, especially if you've moved to a school where no one knows you. It's really helpful if a coach has a strong understanding of the content and standards for which teachers are responsible. Then, as they work in classrooms, coaches can watch for small ways to incorporate best practices and make the best use of their time and expertise.

One of the trickiest things is finding time to conference with teachers without adding to their overwhelming workload. Working alongside teachers in their classrooms, catching a minute or two to talk in the parking lot — these on-the-go conferences can be extremely productive and nonthreatening, encouraging teachers to talk about what they need and to reflect on how things are going.

One final note about coaching: It's important to find ways to get feedback from teachers. It doesn't have to be a formal survey or interview, but knowing what teachers are thinking and how they feel things are going makes a big difference in how effective the coaching ultimately will be.

Coaching is difficult work, but the rules are simple. If you remember to listen first, teach by example, and be patient, you build trust, then credibility. That's a lesson every school-based coach should know by heart. ■

Teacher Leaders Network member Juli Kendall died in August 2006. She was a National Board Certified Teacher with 30 years of experience and had spent more than 20 years teaching and coaching in the Long Beach, Calif., schools. A four-year archive of her reading/writing workshop journals is available at www.middleweb.com.

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