

TACKLING RESISTANCE

Turn what could be a very bad day into a very good opportunity

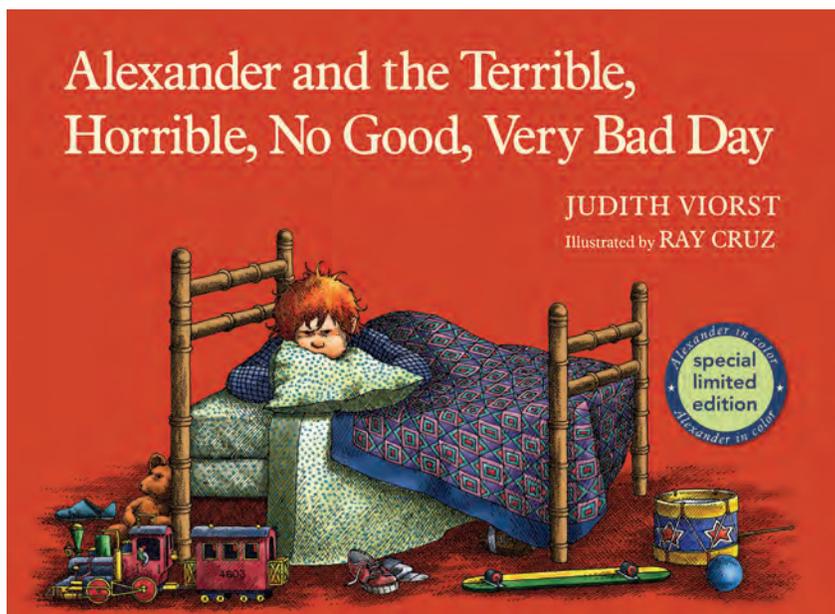
BY ANNEMARIE B. JAY

The time-honored children's story *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972) is a prime example of someone having the kind of day we'd all like to avoid. Having a bad day, an Alexander day, can happen to anyone — even a dedicated literacy coach. An important component of coaching is building collaborative working relationships between the coach and teachers (Burkins, 2007; Knight, 2007; Toll, 2007). When views about instructional practices are similar, positive relationships may develop quickly, but what happens when resistance is stronger than identifiable differences? A coach may find herself experiencing an Alexander day with a noncompliant teacher.

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There are many elements critical to creating an effective coach-teacher relationship. A school should have a shared vision for a particular improvement initiative, a common understanding of coaches' roles in that initiative, and a cadre of skilled, respected coaches.

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Even when all of the elements are in place, coaches will find that teachers are sometimes resistant. Fortunately, there are strategies for addressing the resistant teacher.

VALUING THE LITERACY COACH

A literacy coach is “a reading specialist recognized as an expert teacher by peers and superiors whose main function is to provide professional development to teachers in both one-to-one and group venues with the goal of improving literacy instruction” (Jay & Strong, 2008, p. 3). Literacy coaching is both challenging and rewarding, but not magical. Achieving positive results takes time, effort,

strong foundational knowledge, and good people skills.

Schools fortunate enough to have a literacy coach on staff find that the coach and most classroom teachers build collaborative, collegial relationships over time.

Working together, coaches and teachers discover successful methods for meeting instructional challenges (Knight, 2007).

Unfortunately, not all teachers are eager to participate in professional development or have a coach visit their classrooms. Teachers who persistently exhibit one or both of these characteristics may be professionally noncompliant in either an obvious or

covert way when asked to work with a literacy coach.

TYPES OF NONCOMPLIANCE

There are two types of noncompliance: obvious and covert. Obvious noncompliance is evident when a teacher is outwardly resistant to the coach through verbal or written messages to the coach, by exhibiting negative body language during meetings facilitated by the coach, or by making condescending comments about the coach or coaching to others.

Covert noncompliance is often difficult to detect, even though resistance may be strong. Teachers who exhibit covert noncompliance make excuses for not following through on implementing the techniques or programs shared in professional development, not inviting the coach to visit the classroom, and not being able to provide data about trial applications of strategies or programs in their own classrooms.

Teachers may exhibit either type of noncompliance for a variety of reasons, including discomfort or an attitude of intransigence.

DISCOMFORT

A teacher's discomfort may be caused by a lack of knowledge of why the coach is in the classroom. Some teachers assume that coaches want to visit their classrooms to "right the wrongs" — that is, to change those long-term instructional practices teachers have been using and that students have enjoyed. Feeling that one's instructional efforts may have been misguided would evoke strong feelings of anxiety and discomfort in most of us. Interactions between the coach and teacher must be based on trust, and must never be pejorative or condescending.

In addition, coaches need to be sensitive to the "dilemmas, fears, and celebrations" (Feger, Woleck, & Hickman, 2004, p. 15) of their fellow

teachers. Coaches need to be aware that misassumptions may color teachers' reactions to being observed by a coach. "This coach-sponsored classroom observation is the highest test of trust between the teacher and the coach. The coach is serving as a 'critical friend' for the teacher and is not assuming the role of evaluator in any way" (Bukowiecki, 2007, p. 13). Coaches who begin classroom visits by doing the teaching rather than observing may alleviate teachers' discomfort while simultaneously providing the foundation for a collaborative relationship.

Fear of change is another cause of discomfort for teachers. When schools adopt new instructional programs, coaches are often assigned to help teachers implement the programs. The implementation of a brief timeline to institute a change may cause added stress for teachers who are uncomfortable with the change in the first place (Jay & Strong, 2008).

Another reason for teachers' discomfort with coaching is a lack of understanding of exactly what the coach's role responsibilities are relative to their own. Teachers who have this type of discomfort are typically uncertain about how the literacy coach may impact them directly. If teachers feel uncertainty about coaching in their classrooms after the concept has been introduced in their school, the coach should make every effort to meet with individual teachers before visiting their classrooms. Telling the teacher specifically what will be demonstrated or watched during a classroom visitation in a clear, concise manner will help alleviate discomfort. Inviting the teacher to offer suggestions about what the coach might focus on during the visit also helps to form a collegial teacher-coach partnership. According to Jay and Strong (2008), regardless of the source of a teacher's discomfort, it is important for the coach to maintain a supportive stance. This ongoing

support may help the teacher transition from discomfort to comfort.

A fourth type of discomfort occurs when the teacher struggles with instructional delivery, whether because of student behaviors, time management issues, or a superficial approach to instruction. Any of these situations may make teachers feel uneasy when a visitor is expected in the classroom. Teachers want to feel — and show — the seamless flow of their craft, not a disjointed demonstration. An observant coach can aptly assist teachers through the reflection process by sharing verbal and written comments about observed instruction in a post-visitation conversation. An effective literacy coach can competently and collaboratively address any of these areas with a struggling teacher.

INTRANSIGENCE

Respecting resistance can be a powerful means of reflecting on our own beliefs and practices (Fullan, 2001). Literacy coaches' strong foundational knowledge shapes their beliefs and enables them to respect resistance and to meet that resistance appropriately. However, noncompliance is more than resistance when it is defined by an intransigent attitude of refusal or defiance. Low self-efficacy, philosophical differences with the literacy coach or others, or low expectations for students may foster such an attitude (McKenna & Walpole, 2008).

Noncompliant teachers with an intransigent attitude are adept at avoiding opportunities to work with the coach. According to Jay and Strong (2008), a teacher's intransigence may be caused by one of the following attitudes: thinking he is too busy, thinking that nothing the coach can show him is really new, or think-

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ing that he is an independent contractor in the classroom. Dispelling these attitudes is not an easy task for the coach when the teacher's strong refusal to comply is persistent.

An intransigent attitude may surface when the teacher believes that the coach is taking on an evaluative or judgmental role. It is extremely important for the coach to guarantee the teacher that what is observed in the classroom and spoken between them will remain with them alone. Of course, this should be the case between the coach and any teacher, but those who are especially anxious over coaching need additional reassurance.

VALUING THE TEACHER

Building and sustaining relationships takes time, effort, and self-reflection. Toll (2005) reminds us that "when we listen and learn from resisters, the conversation is richer, the differences often are blurred, and we usually honor one another as people and teachers even if we still disagree" (p. 122).

Coaches who inherently value each teacher are often valued themselves. The goal of a collaborative working relationship between a coach and teachers is to provide "the opportunity for reciprocity of gifts of knowledge and skill, caring and support, feedback and celebration" (Burkins, 2007, p. 125).

WHAT THE LITERACY COACH CAN DO

Literacy coaches need to develop an action plan for working with the noncompliant teacher. The following suggestions may help the coach establish a more positive relationship:

1. **Teach first and observe the teacher later.** This may help the teacher avoid feeling professionally or personally scrutinized.
2. **Revisit classrooms briefly and informally** and make positive

comments about the learning environment.

3. **Face resistance through open, honest conversations with teachers.** Casey (2006) reminds us that the coach does not have to have a pat, right answer to every question or problem posed by teachers. Collegial conversations about instructional challenges between the coach and a strongly resistant teacher may be beneficial to the professional growth of both.
4. **Engage in professional development and networking.** Many books and articles written about coaching in the last five years are good resources for coaches. Talking about methodology, time management, and generalizable noncompliance issues with other coaches can also strengthen one's coaching repertoire.
5. **Talk with teachers often.** Coaches are colleagues of classroom teachers, and sharing the desire to assist them with their multifaceted roles should help garner support for collegial coaching. Resistant teachers may need more one-on-one contact with the coach before as well as after individual coaching sessions.

The coach must develop an action plan to handle working with a noncompliant teacher. It is important for the coach to value each teacher as an individual professional and as part of the overall instructional team of the school. When the coach is accurately aware of the reasons a teacher may be noncompliant and is also sensitive to the individual teacher's personal beliefs and professional history, the coach should be able to determine whether an action plan would be better implemented one-on-one with the teacher or in a small group with others with whom that teacher is comfortable. Once the coach and teacher have worked through an action plan for establishing a more productive

relationship, they can work effectively toward their shared goals for improved teaching and learning for students. Assisting noncompliant teachers to comfortably embrace coaching helps both teachers and coaches avoid Alexander days.

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