



Reprising coaching heavy and coaching light

Since I first wrote about coaching heavy and coaching light in the May 2008 issue of this newsletter, I have engaged in multiple conversations with coaches and their supervisors about the idea behind my original article regarding the two kinds of coaching and why I think this concept is crucial to coaches and the success of coaching.

Coaching heavy does not mean being directive, demanding, or authoritative. Heavy means substantive, weighty, valued. It means robustly engaging in the work of coaching with a laser-like focus on improving student learning. Coaching light is more focused on the teaching rather than learning. It emphasizes the sense of being supported rather than the sense of producing results. Some have even suggested that coaches cannot coach heavy without coaching light first to build relationships. Perhaps that is true for some; however, I do not subscribe to that notion.

Coaches often have the notion that they cannot have substantive conversations with their colleagues without first coaching light to build a constructive relationship. I contend that substantive conversations, held in a dialogic manner without judgment or expectations and focused on beliefs and assumptions rather than actions, does far more to build trust than any amount of coaching light. In other words, more substantive conversations about student learning increase trust.

Coaches can also establish



trust and respectful, productive relationships with teachers by giving authentic feedback supported with evidence about student learning and identifying and unpacking misconceptions.

So what do coaching light and coaching heavy look like in practice?

In practice, coaches use similar strategies for coaching light and heavy. For example, they may hold pre- and post-observation meetings with teachers before and after visiting the teacher's classroom. However, the topics and the intensity of the professional learning differ. In coaching light, the coach invites the teacher to name a focus for the observation without reference to anything other than his or her preference. In coaching heavy, the coach encourages the teacher to

select a focus for their work together, based on the content of professional learning, the school's specific improvement goals, the teacher's own performance improvement goals aligned with the district's performance standards, or student learning goals within the teacher's team or classroom.

In coaching heavy, the coach probes before agreeing, for example, with a teacher who states, "I'd like to work on formative assessment." The coach and teacher engage first in understanding specific student-learning goals and related teacher-learning goals before exploring which particular instructional practice is most likely to achieve those goals. The coach strives to build the precision of the teacher's request so that it

Continued on p. 9

Coaching light	Coaching heavy
Focus on teaching practices identified by teachers	Focus on student learning and the use of specific practices within the school's or district's instructional framework, teachers' performance standards, or aligned with the adopted curriculum
Feedback on teaching practices	Feedback on the interaction between student engagement in learning, performance, and achievement and teaching
Teacher self-assessment based on perceptions or opinions	Data-driven assessment based on student data
Voluntary coaching — only those teachers who request coaching receive it	Expectation for all teachers to engage in coaching — all teachers engage in continuous improvement with specific feedback and support from the coach
Focus on adapting or refining instructional strategies	Focus on transforming practice, examining beliefs, and testing assumptions
Focus on implementing strategies	Focus on deep understanding of the theory and research underlying strategies to ensure executive control
Emphasis on feeling supported	Emphasis on developing expertise

Continued from p. 8

becomes, “I am puzzled that students are not performing as I expect on benchmark assessments. In reality, I am not certain I have adequately assessed students. If I engage students more authentically in the learning process and use more purposeful and frequent formative assessment, I will have more evidence about students’ learning. One specific strategy that is identified in our teaching standards is assessment for learning so that I can adjust my teaching so there are no surprises on the benchmark assessments.” Coaches contribute to this type of clarity in teachers’ thinking by exploring their rationale, motivation, and expected results before providing support.

In discussing teaching, coaching light begins with, “So, how do you think it went from your perspective?” In coaching heavy, the coach begins with, “Let’s review the focus for our

work together and the reasons for selecting that. Let’s also review the data from your classroom. Let’s talk about what these data mean and what generalizations emerge from this lesson that will influence future instruction so that student learning increases.”

In meeting with teams to plan instruction, coaching light sounds like, “What instructional and learning strategies do you recommend for addressing these ideas?” Coaching heavy, on the other hand, sounds like, “What does research tell us are the most appropriate approaches to address these particular content outcomes and the needs of our learners? Let’s unpack that research and study its appropriateness for this portion of the curriculum and our students.”

Coaching heavy focuses on developing and using professional expertise of educators and deepening the body of knowledge about the field of teaching. Coaching light focuses on

pursuing areas of interest grounded in little more than preference.

Coaching heavy is based on several assumptions. First, teaching is a profession with standards of practice that are grounded in research. Coaches support teachers in linking the body of professional knowledge to their practice by examining the effects of their teaching. Second, teachers develop expertise by engaging in continuous improvement with specific feedback and ongoing opportunities to deepen professional knowledge and practice.

The differences between coaching heavy and coaching light are far from subtle and have significant implications for how coaching affects student learning and teaching.

•
Joellen Killion (joellen.killion@learningforward.org) is deputy executive director of Learning Forward. 