

THE LEARNING Principal

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

MOVE BEYOND MANAGEMENT

Coaching for school leaders translates into student improvement

By Valerie von Frank

As a first-year principal in one of Indiana's lowest-performing elementary schools, Robin Peterman faced the challenge of dramatically restructuring the school. With two-thirds of student families not speaking English, she needed to overcome barriers of language and poverty to raise student achievement, and she had little time for a learning curve as a new leader. The state's pressure to reform was immediate.

Finding her footing and the confidence to admit that she didn't know it all wasn't easy. But it was made easier by the support put in place by her district. Rather than just leave her leadership to a traditional sink-or-swim model, Ft. Wayne Community Schools offered Peterman and a handful of other principals in the district's lowest performing schools a critical experience not often available to school leaders — coaching.

While instructional coaches for teachers have become more prevalent around the country, school leaders seldom have the same support.

“Districts often don't assign principals coaches because educators lack a clear vision of the power of coaching to help principals gain skills,” writes Kay Pscencik, a leadership coach and author of *The Coach's Craft: Powerful Practices to Support School Leaders* (2011, p. 12). “Although the nation has developed an intense focus on instructional coaching and teacher leadership, which are essential to teacher learning, leadership development and principal coaching have received less attention.”

Most principals, according to Pscencik, may at best have a mentor who helps them figure out mainly the managerial skills — how to set up the teaching schedule, how to make sure the PTO runs effectively, how to forge bonds with the community. Principals may attend conferences for professional learning, she said, but that's not all the support they need. Coaches, Pscencik said, are able

to ask strategic, focused questions at critical moments that lead the principals to grow in knowledge and understanding of their role.

Coaching provides benefits that can translate into student improvement, Pscencik said. Although she notes that

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no formal studies of school leadership coaching have yet been done, research on the impact of coaching on business executives implementing change has shown good effects (Grant, Curtaynes, & Burton, 2009; Moen, Skaalvik, & Hacker, 2009).

Peterman said coaching helped her grab the reins in her first year. “When you’re brand new and coming into a failing situation, you can doubt yourself a lot and second-guess your decisions,” she said. “You don’t really have anything to compare to except what you’ve seen from the teacher seat.

“Through coaching, you gain confidence. It releases some of the pressure, because you realize it’s all about growth, about professional learning.”

A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR LEADERSHIP LEARNING

Coaching is as beneficial to principals’ professional learning, Psenck said, as it is to solidifying teacher learning. She defines coaching as “just-in-time, personalized support” (2011, p. 30).

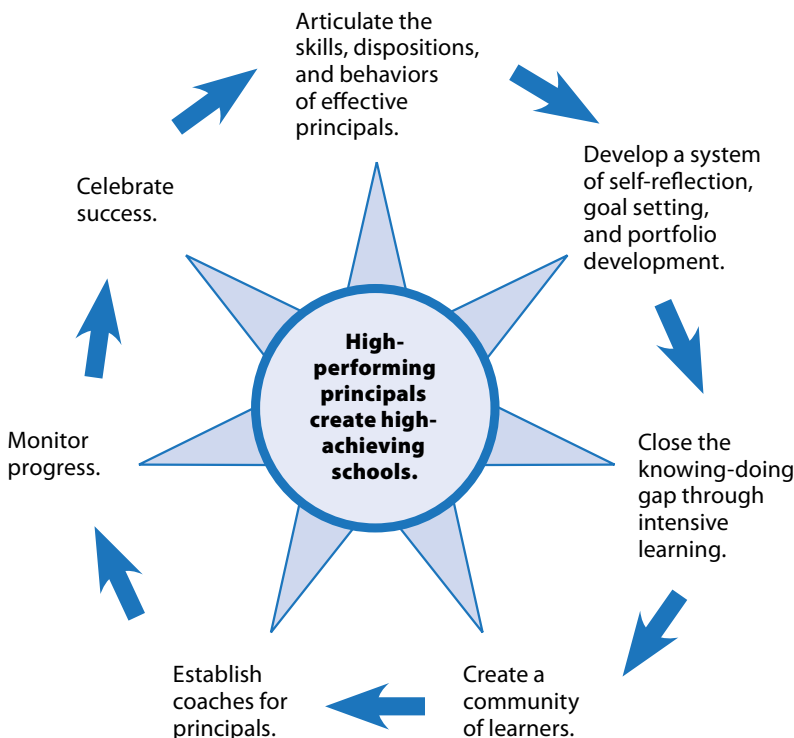
“Coaching, in its pure definition, is a person in relationship with the coachee in a way that the coach is able to ask strategic, focused questions that lead the coachees to learn and to make decisions for themselves,” Psenck said. “The coach is honing the skills of the coachees so they are strong leaders.”

Coaching is a critical element of Psenck’s theory of change for principals’ learning and professional growth.

The essential elements of the theory are:

1. **Articulate the skills, dispositions, and behaviors of effective principals.** Psenck says district leadership teams should define a limited list of skills, based on research, that principals should have. They might begin with the stem: “In this district, our principals will...”
2. **Develop a system of self-reflection, goal setting, and portfolio development.** Principals then assess their own effectiveness using focus groups of staff, students, parents, and community members; perception inventories; or other tools.
3. **Close the knowing-doing gap through intensive learning.** Principals spend time learning in depth about topics needed to strengthen their leadership, such as building trust or creating effective collaboration.
4. **Create a community of learners.** Principals become less isolated by creating their own learning communities to support one another.
5. **Establish coaches for principals.** Coaches help leaders change behaviors and develop new skills and strategies. Without coaching, Psenck writes (2011, p. 32), past experience has shown that other learning is “insufficient and likely will fail to lead to principals learning new skills.”
6. **Monitor progress.** Principals establish measures of effectiveness, such as portfolios, that can help answer questions such as, “What new behaviors am I using in school? What effect are those behaviors having on teacher practice? What are the results in student learning?”
7. **Celebrate success.** Publicly sharing accomplishments and the effects of the learning creates an image of the leader as learner and brings the cycle to the beginning of the circle again.

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In Ft. Wayne, Psenck used the cycle in her work with a small cohort of principals of low-performing schools during six days of summer professional learning. Psenck worked as a leadership coach with each principal during this time, as well as with the group. She also helped the leaders plan the professional learning that they would lead in their own schools and helped them learn leadership skills by sharing facilitation of the sessions.

In breakout sessions, the principals worked with their
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staffs to develop vision and mission statements, set professional learning goals for the year, and develop specific ideas of what success in practice would look like.

“Other professional learning often is (listening to) an expert and then you have to assimilate for yourself how that can integrate into your everyday practice,” Peterman noted. “With a coach, it’s more about service and what you need in your particular situation.”

THE VALUE OF A COACH

Peterman said Psencik’s facilitative approach allowed her to define her own issues and needs, then work to define goals.

“I said, ‘These are the three things on my mind,’ and Kay said, ‘Let’s plot that out. How do you see it? If the year goes the way you want it to, what will it look like?’ ”

Peterman developed areas of focus, including improving data-driven decision making, student behavior, and academic expectations. She identified what improvement would look like in a month, at the end of a semester, and at the end of a year, with measurements to monitor progress.

“What Kay did was show me and my staff how to take responsibility for what we have control over,” Peterman said. “If our instruction is slow and not rigorous, if the pace is slow, if our transitions are ineffective, if our relationships aren’t strong with our children, then it’s not the kids’ fault that no one’s paying attention. It was changing the mindset and saying, ‘What can we control?’

“Through making me articulate where I wanted to get to and having me be part of the process of the steps I was going to take and how I would measure getting there, it made me feel that it was all possible,” Peterman continued.

For Peterman, two years after taking the lead at Abbett Elementary, those decisions have proved to be good ones.

In a school whose students had the lowest 4th-grade scores in the state in 2008-09, with only 4% meeting standards in math and language arts, student achievement has rocketed to 55% of the student body meeting standards on both sections of the exam.

A NEW ROLE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Psencik notes that the role of the principal has changed from being a good manager to being a good instructional leader. The shift has made the job increasingly complex.

Meanwhile, as the current population of school leaders grows older (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross, & Chung, 2003) and leaves the profession, Psencik said new principals more often have less classroom experience and lack deep understanding of instructional practices and curriculum design based on experience rather than textbook learning.

“As principals face greater demands and pressure to

Attributes of a coach

Kay Psencik suggests that principals can seek out coaching if district support is not available, but should look for leaders with proven achievement and the personal attributes that make a good coach. Ask questions to determine whether the coach has these six attributes:

- **Self-awareness:** What drives the coach? What inspires her?
- **Honesty:** How does what the coach thinks, does, and says align with his stated values?
- **Sincerity:** How do the coach’s actions reflect her stated intentions?
- **Competence:** How credible is the coach?
- **Reliability:** Does the coach keep her promises?
- **Intentional:** Is the coach interested in me and what I have to say?

Source: Adapted from *The Coach’s Craft: Powerful Practices to Support School Leaders*, by Kay Psencik. (Learning Forward, 2011, pp. 89-92.)

have all students reach higher levels of achievement, leading is increasingly challenging,” Psencik writes (2011, p. 10). “The leader’s role is pivotal to schools becoming communities of learners in which teachers continuously improve their practice so they can enable students to succeed at high levels.”

Peterman, who put in place a weekly 45-minute all-staff professional learning time at her school, said it succinctly: “True coaching is about how the coach can help me do what needs to be done to help children.”

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