

# PAVE *the* WAY for COACHES

PRINCIPAL'S ACTIONS ARE KEY  
TO SHAPING ROLES  
AND RELATIONSHIPS

By Sally F. Heineke and Barbara Polnick

**I**nstructional coaching can make the difference in whether teachers implement best practices (Coburn & Woulfn, 2012). However, our experiences in various coaching and administrative roles as well as our research with literary coaches has shown that the relationship with and support of the administration, especially the building principal, is essential for coaches to be successful in their leadership role.

Developing trusting relationships and credibility with teachers in a new school can be a daunting challenge for instructional coaches. One coach spoke candidly about the icy environment that greeted her: “The first year, I was treated like I worked for the IRS.”

This reading coach stayed the course and focused her efforts with teachers who were most receptive, the 1st-grade team. Within one year, test scores revealed significant improvement in reading fluency among 1st-

grade students.

The reading coach noted that this success would have been impossible without her principal’s help. “She stood behind everything,” the coach said. “I hung in there because of the principal.”

Both the loneliness of the position and unwillingness of some teachers to try new strategies for improvement can create a hostile environment for instructional coaches. The principal is key in helping the instructional coach get a foot in the door by establishing a climate for professional growth and expectations for success in classrooms that embrace change.

#### WHY COACHING MATTERS

Schools are being held increasingly accountable for improving student achievement. Research shows that teacher quality is the variable most strongly related to student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Tivnan & Hamphill, 2005).

Because of this, administrators are seeking high-quality professional learning for their teachers.

A number of studies describe the effective role coaching can play in professional learning to increase student achievement (e.g. Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010; Sailors & Price, 2010). Instructional coaches provide leadership in developing learning communities and support for teachers’ growth toward professional learning goals. Instructional coaching aligns with Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). For these reasons, administrators are hiring instructional coaches to work with their faculty.

#### THE ADMINISTRATOR’S ROLE

In our experiences in schools, we have witnessed administrators, especially building principals, exert a strong influence on the quality and effectiveness of the coaching that tran-





spires within their school. In a study of the impact coaching had in 116 high-poverty schools (Walpole, McKenna, Uribe-Zarain, & Lamitina, 2010), leadership support for coaching provided the highest number of significant relationships between coaching and classroom instruction. Conversely, another study found that a lack of principal support was one of the most common obstacles to coaching (Richard, 2003).

Although instructional coaches are found in schools across the country, principals may not know how to best support their work and may not be familiar with the literature on coaching. Here are five ways administrators can best support the work of instructional coaches in their schools.

## 1 DEFINE THE COACH'S ROLE.

The administrator and instructional coach should work together to clearly define the role of the coach. Smith (2007) found that when ad-

ministrators splinter the coach's role into multiple responsibilities, the coach loses effectiveness in facilitating teacher learning.

While working as a regional coach trainer, co-author Sally Heineke found that many literacy coaches had been assigned a wide variety of roles and responsibilities, such as administering or overseeing the administration of assessments for all students in the school, overseeing the school's reading intervention program, providing instruction for students who struggled with reading or writing, overseeing schoolwide motivational programs, planning for and supervising summer school programs for children, writing grants for resources, overseeing curriculum resources for teachers to check out, entering test data into a schoolwide database, implementing home-school programs, and on and on. The coaches who had been assigned the widest array of responsibilities did the least amount of

## 5 WAYS TO SUPPORT COACHES

For principals who want to see sustained student growth through improved teaching, we offer these five recommendations for supporting and maximizing the role of an instructional coach.

1. Define the coach's role.
2. Publicize the coach's role.
3. Guard the coach's role — the coach is not an evaluator.
4. Facilitate collaboration.
5. Hire prepared instructional coaches.

### TEAM COACHING TOOL:

See p. 52 for an example of team coaching, which increases the impact of coaching so that more teachers benefit.

instructional coaching.

Instructional coaching can be difficult, and coaches may drift toward other assigned responsibilities rather than tackling the more challenging role of collaborating with teachers. The top priority of instructional coaches should be to facilitate teacher learning that will translate into greater student learning. When the focus of instructional coaching is fractured, meeting professional learning goals becomes doubtful, so clearly defining the coaching role and supporting that work is a necessary first step.

## 2 PUBLICIZE THE COACH'S ROLE.

School administrators must make clear to faculty the parameters of the instructional coach's role and responsibilities. We have seen too many administrators who have abdicated this administrative task, expecting the coach to explain his or her role to the faculty. Consequently, in our experience, teachers step into the vacuum left by passive administrators and exert their own influence in shaping the coach's role.

Although this may not seem negative, having teachers dictate the coach's schedule has sometimes resulted in the coach being pulled to and fro doing whatever teachers deem to be most expedient and helpful to them. For instance, coaches may be asked to take children from the classroom for intervention in order to relieve the classroom teacher of the responsibility of providing additional help for these students.

We have also seen coaches asked to run copies, laminate materials, and prepare materials for centers. Allocating the coach's time in ways that take the coach away from his or

her professional learning role can be avoided if the building administrator clearly defines, publicizes, and frequently recognizes the coach's role, responsibilities, and work.

## 3 GUARD THE COACH'S ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

As principal and coach work together to outline the parameters of the coach's work, it is also important to keep in mind that the coach should never be viewed as a staff evaluator. Teachers and coaches stress that gaining and maintaining trusting relationships with teachers is a necessary foundation for instructional coaching (Heineke, 2010). For coaching to be successful, coaching relationships must be safe, confidential, and nonevaluative (Burkins, 2007; Dozier, 2006).

Teachers say that it is important that coaches be seen as being in the trenches with them, not evaluating their performance. Teachers need to feel free to open up and share with the coach their own weaknesses and learning needs without being fearful that everything they say or do will go straight back to the prin-

cipal or other administrator.

Principals need to make it clear to coaches that they do not expect or want coaches to evaluate teachers and that the coach's role is to collaborate and problem solve with teachers, supporting and scaffolding teacher learning. Administrators must be proactive in guarding against doing anything that would lead teachers to view an instructional coach as another evaluator.

## 4 FACILITATE COLLABORATION.

Principals need to support coaches in developing a schedule that provides time for teachers and coaches to collaborate within the school day. Steckel (2009) found that, for coaches to make an impact, administrators must facilitate a school culture that values inquiry and adult learning. So principals need to set aside time on the schedule for coaches to meet with grade-level or content-specific teams.

We have observed principals of high-performing schools who scheduled collaborative meetings during conference periods scheduled back-to-back with times when the classroom teacher is not in charge of his or her students, such as lunch, art, music, computer, physical education, or other special classes. Principals have also used professional learning dollars to bring in substitute teachers periodically to provide time for extended collaboration.

These collaborative meetings can serve a variety of purposes, such as examining student data and student work to drive instructional changes or to engage in a study of a professional book or other literature that meets teachers' needs. After laying the groundwork in these collaborative settings, the coach can follow up with classroom coaching as teachers implement the ideas and instructional practices they discussed in their collaborative meetings.

Organizational decisions made by administrators must provide the climate, time, and opportunities for teachers and coaches to work together — growing, learning, and problem solving.

## 5 HIRE PREPARED COACHES.

Credibility with the faculty will be difficult to obtain if the coach does not have the necessary expertise. Instructional coaches need to have leadership skills, coaching skills, and expertise in the focused subject areas as they coach teachers.

Can you imagine transitioning a classroom teacher into the role of school counselor, media specialist, or assistant principal without that teacher having prepared for such a role? Yet across the country, teachers have been moved from the classroom into the very challenging job of instructional coach with little or no preparation.

The Standards for Reading Specialists/Literacy Coach issued through the International Reading Association (2010) recommend that reading and literacy coaches should have previous teaching experience and a master's degree with a concentration in reading and writing education. Furthermore, the master's

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program for instructional coaches should include courses that develop expertise in leadership and coaching teachers as well as working with children, necessitating a supervised practicum experience.

Four coaches with whom Heineke had previously worked as a reading coach trainer volunteered for a research project on coaching. Heineke (2010) found that two coaches who had obtained reading credentials (a master's degree in reading and a reading specialist certification) were far more successful in their role of coaching than were the two teachers who assumed the role without specialized training.

Teachers who worked with the two credentialed coaches talked about their coach's knowledge of reading acquisition and instruction and viewed these coaches as valuable resources. They readily listed many of their own instructional practices that had been heavily influenced by the work of these literacy coaches.

On the other hand, although the teachers who discussed the noncredentialed coaches spoke positively about their relationship, they identified very few instructional practices that had been influenced by their literacy coaches. In fact, one teacher stated that she had not learned anything from working with her literacy coach.

While the coaches and teachers in this study were limited in number and other factors may have played into these findings, the words of one of the noncredentialed coaches underscores the difficulty of undertaking such challenging responsibilities without the necessary preparation: "I'm not very far removed from the classroom, and I never had a supportive reading coach. I really did not understand the concept of a reading coach. And I'm not sure I do now."

For two years, this reading coach had put forth her best effort to fulfill her new role, yet she was still struggling to even understand the parameters of her responsibilities and how she should go about accomplishing them. Administrators need to acknowledge instructional coaching as a specialized field and hire professionals who have prepared to undertake the challenges the role demands.

As administrators step up to the plate and provide these kinds of support for instructional coaching, they will ensure that the money and time invested in professional learning will pay off with greater dividends in sustained teacher growth and student achievement.

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## TEAM COACHING:

# Here's the situation

The benefits of team coaching include exponentially increasing the impact of coaching so that more teachers benefit from the coaching provided. In addition, team coaching supports group maturity, more rapid growth and development, innovation, teachers' confidence, and teacher capacity.

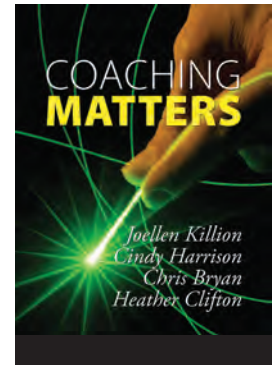
With team coaching, group members commit to their own growth and that of other members. Individual members know that they are supported by the group and that they are not alone in facing the challenges or striving for the goals they seek to reach. That sense of support often enhances their willingness to step out of their comfort zone. The nonevaluative nature of interactions within team coaching provides teachers with a safe place to take risks.

Try this tool as a protocol for teams wanting to support one member addressing an issue, putting themselves in their colleague's shoes.

**Purpose:** To generate multiple ideas from a team to support an individual facing a challenge in his or her professional practice while leaving the decision making to the individual. (The coach will find it important to stress possibilities rather than give advice.)

**Materials:** Chart paper, markers.

**Time:** Approximately 1 hour per situation, depending on team size.



*Coaching Matters*, by Joellen Killion, Cindy Harrison, Chris Bryan, and Heather Clifton, reveals how coaching can make a difference. Each chapter describes an element of what research and the authors' experiences show it takes to make coaching effective. This tool is one of many that supplement the content of the book. Buy the book at <http://store.learningforward.org>. The book is available for \$45 for nonmembers, \$36 for members. *Learning Forward, 2012*

### BEFORE THE COACHING SESSION

TIME

1 Invite team members to present a situation to the team. Identify one person from among the volunteers, or schedule all volunteers to present over a series of meetings. After identifying the volunteer(s), use the questions here to guide the volunteer so he or she is ready to describe a situation to the team. Guidelines might include:

2 Present a description of the situation, answering:

a. What is it?

b. Who is involved?

c. What does it affect?

d. How do I feel about it?

e. What goal(s) am I striving to achieve?

5 minutes

AT THE COACHING SESSION		TIME
1	<p>Introduce the protocol and set norms for the team's work.</p> <p>Suggested norms might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate actively.</li> <li>• Be open to multiple, different ways of approaching the situation.</li> <li>• Engage in divergent thinking.</li> <li>• Acknowledge that each individual should choose the approach that is best for his or her situation.</li> <li>• Accept all ideas.</li> <li>• Refrain from critiquing ideas.</li> <li>• Speak from own experience.</li> </ul>	5 minutes
2	Ask the presenter to describe the situation while team members listen carefully.	5 minutes
3	Have team members identify in a round-robin fashion what their goal(s) would be if this were their situation.	3 minutes
4	Have the presenter describe related factors he or she is considering while team members listen carefully.	2 minutes
5	Have team members share what they would think about this situation if it were theirs.	5 minutes
6	Have team members shift gears and share possible strategies, along with their reasons for suggesting a strategy. Members should suggest only one strategy at a time, allowing other members to offer ideas. One team member can record the ideas and rationales, perhaps on a chart so all can see them. The presenter should listen carefully to each idea. The group should not discuss or criticize any ideas.	15 minutes
7	Ask team members to pause to choose the idea that they might use given their current understanding of the situation and to report out, in turn, their selection and rationale.	7 minutes
8	Ask the presenter to share his or her choice and rationale.	3 minutes
9	Involve all members in discussing what they learned from the experience.	10 minutes

Source: Killion, J., Harrison, C., Bryan, C., & Clifton, H. (2012). *Coaching matters*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.