



THE SECRET TO GREAT COACHING

**INQUIRY METHOD HELPS TEACHERS
TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING**

By Les Foltos

A common question raised by new coaches is: When can I share my experience and expertise with teachers I am coaching to help them improve? It is a logical question. Many coaches know that they were chosen for the role in part because their peers respect them as a teacher. They know the instructional strategies they have used give them credibility with other teachers at their school, and their training as a coach helped them develop more expertise. Naturally, they wonder, why not take on the role of expert?

The answer to their question is critical to the success of all coaches, no matter how much experience they have coaching, and that answer is shaped by research on educational reform and the experiences of thousands of coaches.

Research by Fullan and others has demonstrated that improving teaching and learning requires that schools build the individual and collective capacity of teachers, and collaboration among teachers is one of the key strategies to build capacity (Fullan 2011; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). Coaching unlocks the power of collaboration. While coaching is a powerful tool, coaches often wonder how best to tap into that power.

Successful coaches realize that routinely taking on the role of the expert with the answers is the wrong path toward collaboration and capacity building. As Anna Walter, a peer coach in Edmonds, Wash., observes, “If you want teachers to take ownership for learning, the coach can’t be the expert” (A. Walter, personal communication, September 28, 2011).

Ken Kay and Valerie Greenhill (2012) reported on a group of coaches who played the role of expert so well and so consistently that they created a sense of “learned helplessness” on the part of the teachers they were coaching (p. 102). There may be some role for coach as expert, but

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clearly there must be more effective collaborative strategies for coaches to employ if they hope to build their peers’ capacity to improve teaching and learning.

These more effective strategies can be derived from the attributes that coaches say make them successful. They strive to build relationships with their collaborating teachers by building trust and respect. These coaches report that their success rests on creating a relationship that is also friendly, personalized, manageable, supportive, and private (Foltos, 2013).

Coaches insist that all of these qualities are important, but when asked which of these traits is most critical to help peers build capacity to improve teaching and learning, many coaches focus on the importance of being supportive. They understand that their peers want to change, but the pressures of high-stakes standardized testing, new teacher evaluation systems, and the lack of effective support leave them reluctant to take risks and innovate.

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INQUIRY OVER ADVOCACY

Grace Dublin, a peer coach in Seattle, Wash., says that she often could answer the questions her peers raise, but

she doesn't. Instead, she responds with questions designed to help them formulate their strategies. Following this approach, Dublin says, means, "It is ultimately their answer" (G. Dublin, personal communication, September 13, 2011).

Many coaches I have interviewed agree with Dublin's approach because they believe that the primary responsibility for learning rests on the shoulders of those learning and relying on inquiry is a powerful method to reach that goal. Assuring that the learner is taking responsibility for learning is a key strategy coaches use to help their peers develop the capacity to improve their teaching practices. In other words, the coach's role is to facilitate learning.

Coaches facilitate learning by using inquiry to encourage their learning partner to question current practices and to consider new practices and strategies. The coach may play an active role in helping the peer identify answers to the challenges they face, but ultimately the peer who is collaborating with the coach is making decisions and choosing a course of action.

As I work with peer coaches, I often ask them to compare coaching with teaching rock climbing. One coach from New South Wales

who was discussing these two forms of teaching noted, "At some point, the person learning to climb has to be independent, so the instructor has to build the climber's capacity." Coaching is much the same. Teachers won't grow professionally, nor will they have the capacity to improve their craft, if their coach tells them what to do. Successful coaches build capacity, not dependence.

Garmston and Wellman (1999) argue that successful collaboration requires a balance between advocacy and inquiry. Effective peer coaches emphasize inquiry over advocacy. Inquiry builds capacity to improve teaching and learning by helping teachers to be more effective at designing and implementing learning activities that meet the needs of their students. The building blocks of effective inquiry are collaborative norms and probing questions.

NORMS, PROBING QUESTIONS, AND EFFECTIVE INQUIRY

To avoid taking ownership of the learning, successful coaches discuss and develop the roles they will play with their peers and school leadership. These same discussions should help the coach's learning partner to define the roles and responsibilities he or she will assume while working with a coach.

By defining these roles and responsibilities, coaches and their learning partners also create individual and collective accountability for learning in a way that assigns the primary responsibility for learning to the collaborating teacher.

This basic set of roles and responsibilities — something we might define as norms for collaboration — are critical to building an effective supportive coaching relationship. Without

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agreement on roles and responsibilities, coaches and their peers may find that coaching can founder or fail.

Collaborative norms shape coaching conversations in ways that build trust and respect; they define accountability and build capacity. Collaborative norms are essential for effective coaching. When teachers come to a coach to discuss an issue they are grappling with, the coach helps them puzzle it out.

There is both individual and collective accountability. Jim Knight's research (2011) on instructional coaching led him to conclude that joint accountability is an essential element of successful partnerships (p. 30).

While joint accountability is important, ultimately the collaborating teacher develops the answer that he or she brings back to the classroom to implement. The teacher has drawn on what he or she learned with and from the coach and taken that learning to shape a solution.

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Probing questions are tools coaches use to encourage their learning partners to solve the issues facing them. Probing questions get the teacher to think more deeply about and develop answers to the issues important to him or her. They can offer teachers a different perspective that helps them draw alternative conclusions on how to approach a problem. Probing questions are at the core of the inquiry method of learning and build the collaborating teacher's capacity to create and offer students powerful learning activities.

What makes a good probing question? First, it must be a question. This may seem obvious, but many people who use probing questions already have an answer in mind when they ask the question. If the questioner knows the answer he wants, he is simply masking his solution with a question mark.

The National School Reform Faculty produces a *Pocket Guide to Probing Questions*. It recommends that the questioner start by determining if "you have a 'right' answer in mind. If so, delete the judgment, or don't ask it" (Thompson-Grove, Frazer, & Dunne, n.d.).

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Effective probing questions usually start with a paraphrase, and they are often open-ended. Stems or sentence starters might include the following:

- You said ...; have you ever thought about ...?
- Why ...?
- What might the next step be?
- Are there other strategies that you could use to ...? (Meyer et al., 2011).

Don't underestimate these questions because they seem so simple. One of the most powerful probing questions I have heard is also one of the simplest. "So you tried ... with your students. What did you learn from that?" Or the question might be asked a slightly different way. "So you tried ... with your students. What did they learn from that, and what is your evidence?" Remember, the purpose of the probing question is to get teachers to think more deeply about their practice. Simple probing questions can be incredibly powerful reflective tools.

Probing questions are the key to inquiry-based learning and are essential for coaches who want to avoid advocating for a solution based on their ideas and experiences. Mary Lou Ley, who directs the Wisconsin Peer Coaching Collaborative, says, "Professional growth occurs when we engage in focused conversations around evidence of teaching and learning" (Ley, 2011).

Ley offers coaches a colorful metaphor to put this belief into practice and to focus and sharpen their probing questions. Getting to an effective probing question, Ley says, is like peeling back the layers of an onion one at a time (Ley, 2011; M. Ley, personal communication, July 16, 2012).

Coaches peel away the layers of the learning activity until they have exposed what the teacher wants students to know and be able to do. Once they have peeled back the layers, the coach will be more likely to raise probing questions that focus on student learning.

Using probing questions that emphasize what the students are doing and learning is critical. These questions keep the conversations focused on student learning and help to avoid discussions about the teacher than can quickly become personal and unproductive. These kind of probing questions focus collaborative discussions on learning, not the teacher.

Experienced coaches aren't the only ones who place a premium on this approach to effective collaboration. After reviewing many evaluations of coaching written by teachers who collaborate with coaches, I have yet to find one that says, "Thank goodness I have someone to tell me what to think or do."

Instead, they talk about the value of working with a coach they can learn with and from. They clearly want support, but a particular type of support from a friendly peer.

What coaches need to take away from the idea of these collaborating teachers is straightforward. Effective coaching requires that coaches develop collaboration and communication strategies designed to play the role of a friendly peer working to help his or her learning partners solve the issues challenging them.

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Coaches who know how to shape strong collaborative norms and use inquiry effectively will be most successful at helping their colleagues develop the capacity to improve teaching and learning. Effective coaches need to remember that taking on the role of expert can help create learned helplessness. Inquiry helps teachers build the capacity to improve teaching and learning.

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