



**ASK**

# Michelle King

## How do I coach peers who have more experience than I do?

**Q** I've recently become a high school instructional coach supporting teachers who used to be my peers, and some of them have significantly more teaching experience than I do. It is now my responsibility to facilitate a couple of weekly subject-oriented professional learning communities (PLCs), observe teachers within specific subject areas, and offer individual follow-up and support to teachers as they develop new lessons and implement a new curriculum program. I've already encountered some resistance that I perceive to be based on my experience relative to these teachers. What are some strategies for building my credibility with my former peers and creating supportive relationships so that we can all do well in our roles?

Transitioning into a new role that changes the relationship from peer to coach presents both challenges and opportunities. I experienced a similar situation when I accepted the responsibilities as a middle school mathematics department chair. Every member of my team had more experience than I did, and at least one had previously been a department chair. More context: I had been placed in this role not because my colleagues were unable to meet the expectations of the role, but rather because none of them were interested in the position. When I accepted the role, it was at the request and encouragement of my principal — partly because I had proven I was open to collaboration, but also because I had expressed an interest in leadership opportunities that focused on curriculum and instruction.

Despite the support from my principal, the challenges were obvious. I needed to establish, build, and maintain credibility and create supportive relationships. The way to do this as a

new instructional coach happens to be the same way you'd go about it no matter your experience level: You must listen, establish clear boundaries, and demonstrate integrity.

### **LISTEN.**

As self-help author Bryant H. McGill has said, "One of the most sincere forms of respect is to actually listen to what another has to say." And as a new leader, it's crucial you listen to your teachers first. Making time to listen clearly demonstrates you care about their concerns. Listening provides the opportunity to really get to know a person. However, listening does not mean being silent. In my coaching training, we practiced listening with mind, body, and heart. This means attending to not only what people are saying, but also the expression on their face, the tone of their voice, and also intimating what is being said between the words. As we listen, we develop interpersonal relationships and demonstrate that each person matters.

Each issue, we ask a learning professional to answer your professional learning questions. This month's response comes from Michelle King, associate director of communities at Learning Forward.

Meaningful things are accomplished when people connect and work together.

### **ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES.**

Setting and communicating boundaries shows mutual trust and affirms the value of each person in the coaching relationship. It's important to be supportive and responsive to needs, but also to avoid falling into the role of classroom assistant. Boundaries can be formal or informal. The purpose is to agree on the conditions of time, space, confidentiality, and goals. As the coach, be clear and consistent about the

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support you provide and when you are available.

#### **DEMONSTRATE INTEGRITY.**

To build credibility, you must be a person of your word. In other words, exhibit integrity. Do what you say you will do. Be on time to meetings. Keep your appointments. Admit and take responsibility for mistakes or miscommunications. Finally, maintain the confidentiality that is required

in coaching. There's nothing more frustrating or damaging to a person in a coaching relationship than realizing something shared with her coach in confidence — outside of necessary information owed to an administrator — is now common knowledge among peers.

Establishing credibility among peers and creating supportive relationships are vital to the coaching role. If we want to see transformation and meaningful

changes in education, an instructional coach must intentionally build purposeful and authentic connections with others. Being an effective instructional coach is not about winning friends and influencing people. Rather, it is about connecting with colleagues by listening well, branding yourself as a leader with clear boundaries, and demonstrating integrity. That is true no matter the number of years you've been an educator. ■

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#### **LEARNING PROFESSIONALS: WE WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!**

The "Ask" column is a way to open a dialogue with learning leaders about the issues you face daily. No topic is too broad or narrow. Whether you are struggling to establish a principal pipeline in a rural county or wondering how to find a literacy coach for your school, we'd like to discuss your concerns.

Send your questions to [ask@learningforward.org](mailto:ask@learningforward.org). Take as many words as you need to explain your question(s) — understanding that we may edit them for length or clarity.

We look forward to hearing from you.