


# 5 key points

## to building a coaching program

BY JIM KNIGHT

JIM KNIGHT, a research associate at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, is the author of *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction* (Corwin Press, 2007). You can contact him at 1122 W. Campus Rd., Suite 508, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, 785-550-8708, fax 785-864-5728, e-mail: jknight@ku.edu.



**A**cross America today, hundreds of instructional coaches are being hired to improve professional practice in schools. Preliminary results (Knight, 2007) suggest there are reasons to be optimistic about this form of professional development. Since coaches provide on-site professional learning, they can adapt their approach to meet the unique needs of the teachers and students in the schools where they work. And, since coaches can provide professional development that addresses teachers' concerns at different stages of the change process (Hall & Hord, 2006; Prochaska, Norcross, & Diclemente, 1994), coaching can lead to sustained implementation of new teaching practices in schools.

The danger is that schools will imple-

ment school-based coaching too simplistically, underestimating the complexity of change initiatives. However, if educational leaders recognize and respond to the complexity of change, in particular by paying attention to five key points in building a coaching program, school-based coaches can make a difference. When coaching programs are designed well, the chances of making a significant difference are greater and the potential of coaching can be realized.

### 1. TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP

In a 1997 study, teachers reported that they were four times more likely to implement teaching practices they learned during partnership sessions than those they learned in traditional sessions (Knight, 1998). Partnership takes an approach that:

- Professional developers and teachers are equal partners;
- Teachers should have choices regarding what and how they learn;
- Teachers should reflect and apply learning to their real-life practice as they are learning;
- Professional development should enable authentic dialogue; and
- Professional development should respect and enable the voices of teachers to be heard.

In our ongoing study of coaching, however, we have found that a purely partnership approach that exclusively relies on bottom-up initiatives has limitations (Knight, 2007). A bottom-up approach that does not have the principal's guiding hand as the instructional leader will lead to teachers adopting new teaching practices, but unsystematically — with some and not others implementing the change so school improvement may progress incoherently. A purely bottom-up approach also risks placing teachers significantly out of step with district and state mandates. When a bottom-up approach offered teachers

complete freedom to choose whether to participate, those teachers who most needed to change frequently were the ones who chose not to participate.

Of course, a purely top-down approach is not a practical alternative. When leaders adopt a purely top-down stance, they risk introducing what counselors refer to as an “ironic process,” an approach that, “causes the very outcome that it was meant to avert” (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p. 37). Telling teachers they must work with an instructional coach actually makes it more difficult for coaches to assist teachers.

“When you tell teachers to do something, they resent it,” said Ric Palma, an instructional coach in Topeka, Kan. (personal communication, August 29, 2004). “If they do it, they’re going to do it in a half-baked ... manner. And others will just refuse, because they don’t like to be told what to do.”

Instructional coaches need a balance of bottom-up and top-down strategies to be effective.

They should position themselves as equal partners collaborating with fellow teachers, basing their professional actions on partnership principles. Principals should support their on-site coaches by focusing school change initiatives to make it easier for teacher and coach to work together on interventions that have the highest possibility of impacting student achievement. Most importantly, the principal and coach must work together to ensure that those who need help get it.

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### 2. EASY AND POWERFUL

In *The Evolving Self*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1993) says that for

an idea or innovation to supercede another idea or technology, the new idea must be easier and more powerful. “Ideas, values, technologies that do the job with the least demand on psychic energy will survive,” the author states (p. 123). “An appliance that does more work with less effort will be preferred.”

Similarly, for teachers to abandon an old teaching practice to embrace a new one, coaches must offer a practice that is both more powerful and easier to use than the current strategy.

Teachers will not adopt practices that are difficult to implement. Thus, one of a site-based coach’s primary tasks is to do everything possible to make it easier for teachers to implement new teaching practices. Coaches highlight, simplify, and clarify practices described in teacher manuals, prepare materials, make copies or handouts if necessary, model in the teachers’ classroom, observe teachers, and provide feedback.

“My job is to remove every barrier that might stand in the way of a

teacher implementing” a new practice, said Tricia McKale, a coach in Topeka, Kan. (personal communication, April 8, 2005).

To support school-based coaches in helping teachers adopt change, professional development leaders must provide coaches with the resources and time they need to remove barriers

teachers face in implementing new methods. Also, coaches and leaders must evaluate the teaching practices they are sharing with teachers to ensure that they are making a real difference in children’s and teachers’ lives. When teachers have a chance to implement a practice that really works and that is easy to implement, they usually adopt it quickly.

### Research on coaches

Since 1999, researchers at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning have been studying instructional coaches (Knight, 2007). In particular, researchers have studied two programs:

- **Pathways to Success**, in partnership with USD 501 in Topeka, Kan., and
- **Passport to Success**, in partnership with the Maryland State Department of Education.

### 3. SELF-ORGANIZING AND HIGHLY ORGANIZED

When coaches work with an open mind, without a formalized, structured approach, and see their task as spreading a healthy virus in schools, they are more likely to succeed.

At Landon Middle School in Topeka, Kan., for example, coach LaVonne Holmgren shared writing strategies from the Strategic Instructional Model with a few pioneering language arts teachers when she arrived at the school. After those teachers were successful, others wanted to try the strategies, and soon a majority of the language arts staff was using the strategies. At that point, Holmgren guided the staff in creating a schoolwide curriculum ensuring that all language arts teachers taught grade-appropriate writing strategies. Had Holmgren arrived at the school with a plan to institutionalize the writing strategies, she likely would have met resistance or other roadblocks. By allowing the plan to grow and develop based on teacher interest and student need, she got deep commitment to a schoolwide plan that every teacher implemented.

To help accelerate the spread of “healthy viruses,” coaches should ensure that:

- They share teaching practices that are powerful and easy to use;
- Their first encounters with teachers are highly effective;
- Teacher leaders within the school have opportunities to be early adopters; and
- They use a variety of communication strategies (newsletters, e-mails, bulletin boards, word of mouth) to ensure that teachers know about successes when they occur.

When someone offers a service that is easy to use and that helps students, teachers become interested in using it pretty quickly. Support coaches by allowing them time to build rapport and respond to teachers’ needs. Once a critical mass of teachers use what the coach has to offer, the coach and principal together encourage the creation of more permanent structures.

### 4. AMBITIOUS AND HUMBLE

Alex LeClaire (a pseudonym) began his coaching career excited about helping teachers use strategies he had found extremely successful in teaching writing. He began the school year with a passionate presentation to teachers about the power of strategic instruction, and he quickly lined up conferences with teachers in their classrooms, in the staff room, and at team meetings to convince them to get on board.

The more LeClaire pushed, the less enthusiastic his colleagues became and the more barriers they put up. As teachers turned away, LeClaire became even more zealous in his attempts at persuasion.

Eventually, he became frustrated and began privately, then publicly, criticizing his colleagues for failing to do the right thing for kids. His criticism, of course, alienated staff even more, and by the end of his first year, LeClaire felt his efforts were wasted, and he blamed the teachers, who he

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said “were too stubborn to change.”

Another coach, Lauren Morgan (a pseudonym), was the embodiment of humility. Morgan was determined not to force herself on teachers and to work with only those who wanted to work with her. Morgan was careful not to put herself out in front of the staff; she preferred to stay in the background. Teachers liked her, but they always seemed a little too busy to try

her ideas. As time went by, Morgan found she had very few teachers collaborating with her. She waited patiently, but the right time never seemed to come along. Morgan found herself doing more and more busy work within the school and less coaching. At the end of the year, Morgan realized that she had worked with only eight teachers, and most of those had made only a superficial

attempt at new practices.

Successful coaches embody a paradoxical mixture of ambition and humility, a mix of attributes similar to those described by Jim Collins (2001) for Level 5 leaders. Level 5 leaders “are incredibly ambitious — but their ambition is for the institution, not themselves” (p. 21). Effective coaches, like Collin’s Level 5 leaders, should be “a study in duality: modest and will-

ful, humble and fearless” (p. 22).

Devona Dunekack, a coach in Topeka, Kan., embodies both personal humility and willful ambition.

“I just ask teachers if they’re interested in an extra set of hands,” Dunekack said (personal communication, March 16, 2004). “I never put on airs that I know more than them. ... I’m just not trying to be anything other than a colleague.”

Dunekack works to nourish relationships with each teacher in the school, and builds up trust before sharing ideas. She is supportive and kind, but keeps charts on each teacher and the extent of their commitment to coaching. If a teacher does not collaborate with her, Dunekack doesn’t take it personally, but sees that teacher as a challenge, and through a forceful kindness, almost always wins over each teacher.

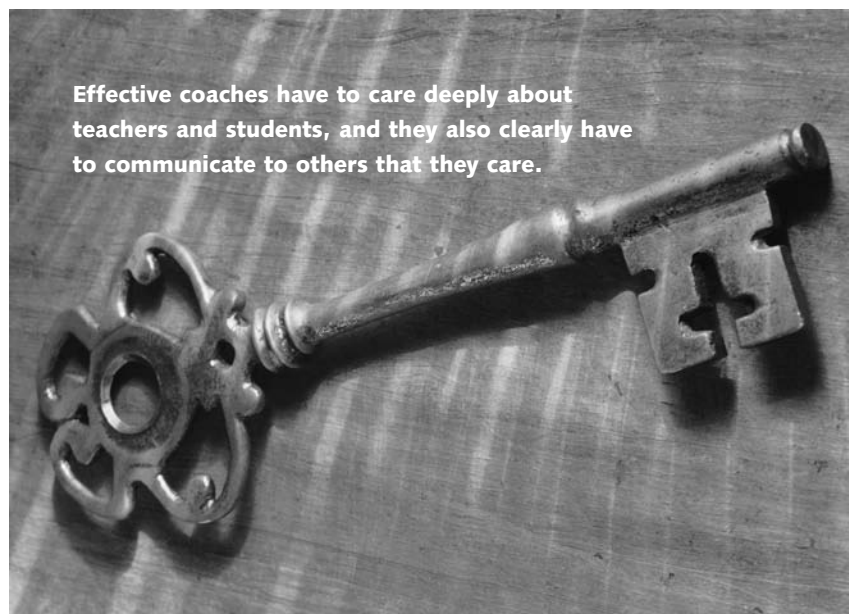
Not surprisingly, more than 95% of the teachers at Eisenhower Middle School collaborate with Dunekack, and Eisenhower students have shown the greatest improvement on state reading assessments in the Topeka district for each of the past three years.

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Hiring coaches who embody both ambition and humility helps create a successful experience.

##### 5. ENGAGED AND DETACHED

Lynn Barnes, coach at Jardine Middle School in Topeka, Kan., is an outstanding relationship builder. She is positive, funny, warm, and very supportive of others. She loves, she says, “communicating with people ... making them feel good about themselves and what they teach” (personal communication, July 14, 2005). Not



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surprisingly, Barnes considers coaching to be “the perfect job to make people feel good about themselves, to feel good about their profession.”

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“You have to build a relationship before you do anything,” Barnes said, “and to do that, you truly need to care about the individual you are working with and their students.”

Yet coaches have to be careful not to weave too much of themselves into their jobs. As Ronald Heifitz and Martin Linsky (2002) observed, “To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear — their daily habits, tools, loyalties, and ways of thinking. ... And people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined, or eliminated” (p.2).

Jean Clark, a coach at Bohemia Manor Middle School in Cecil County, Md., learned this firsthand. Shortly after beginning her job, Clark says she stepped into the staff lounge in time to overhear a teacher say,

“The reason why there’s evil in this building is because of Jean Clark.”

Clark had to learn to remain steady and calm. She came to understand that leading as a coach put her in the line of fire. “It’s not about me,” she said. “This is their stuff. It’s not personal. ... Some people are going to like me, and some people aren’t, and in the end, they will come along whether they like me or not, if they see their children growing.” Clark succeeded as a coach, and her school has had the greatest gains in the county in the last two years.

The ability to connect with others is a critical characteristic of effective coaches. Principals and staff development leaders should provide training on how to communicate effectively and how to build that emotional connection with others. Coaches also need a structured support network with other coaches to support them in the face of inevitable resistance.

##### SUMMARY

More than a decade and a half ago, Seymour Sarason published *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform* (Jossey-Bass, 1990), a book whose title captured the frustrations experienced by many educational

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leaders valiantly promoting school improvement initiatives. The preliminary positive results of coaching and other promising professional development and school reform efforts suggest that there now is, indeed, cause for optimism about future reform efforts. When planners and implementers support coaches by recognizing and responding to the complexity of change, in particular by responding to the five paradoxes outlined here, their chances of success improve greatly.

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