

What the
teacher
leader
needs

FROM THE PRINCIPAL

BY ANITA PANKAKE AND GAYLE MOLLER

Administration's support in eight areas can aid the school-based coach's success

If principals expect to reap the full benefits of having teacher leaders in coaching positions, they should create working conditions that encourage positive relationships, reduce risks, and provide leadership development.

Principals can employ eight strategies that encourage and support school-based coaches (Moller & Pankake, 2006). While none of the eight strategies are profound, we have evidence of their success through our work with hundreds of coaches and principals over the last 25 years.

1. Collaboratively build and monitor an action plan.

A school’s staff develops a shared vision for students’ instructional needs, but school leaders facilitate making the vision a reality. For example, if the vision is to build math literacy for all students, then the school-based coach and the principal must determine how to collaboratively lead this effort.

The principal and coach work together to develop a plan, delineating roles and responsibilities and identifying a timeline with short-term and long-term goals, along with benchmarks.

As the two begin to implement the plan, the principal must remain an integral part of the coach’s work. The principal and coach must com-

municate regularly. For example, one principal and coach use regular planning meetings, scheduled e-mail, telephone calls, and memos to communicate. Meetings focus on success in moving toward defined goals, as well as problems that need to be solved to achieve the school’s mission. Revisit the plan periodically to be sure there is progress.

2. Negotiate the relationship.

School-based coaches’ relationships with principals are critical because principals govern access to resources, such as information, opportunities for professional learning, and fiscal resources. To work effectively together, the principal and school-based coach first must acknowledge their different needs. The principal

has the formal power and authority inherent in the position. The school coach’s resources are less tangible — teaching expertise and connections with peers. The goal is to achieve a reciprocal relationship that taps into these resources to meet each person’s needs — the school-based coach’s need for productive, effective relationships with his or her colleagues and the students, and the principal’s need to focus on his or her administrative responsibilities, such as budget, personnel, and interactions with external groups.

Principals negotiate this relationship by:

- Holding frequent brief meetings with the school-based coach to keep updated on interactions throughout the school;

- Advising the teacher leader in selecting individuals to serve on project task forces and committees;
- Providing a specific agenda item at staff meetings for school coaches to report progress and acknowledge colleagues' assistance; and
- Understanding that change may take some time as coaches forge new relationships with colleagues.

3. Be available.

Principals' accessibility is a resource for school coaches. Even brief, informal meetings can help

school-based coaches in problem solving, such as generating ideas for dealing with conflicts among staff members, noting a need for materials or meeting space, and brainstorming remedies for scheduling conflicts.

The principal can get a sense of the issues and use that knowledge to suggest professional development opportunities for some or all staff.

4. Provide access to human and fiscal resources.

Asking coaches to meet their responsibilities without allowing them autonomy to get necessary resources can sabotage their effort. Principals can identify both human and financial resources school-based coaches can access in their work with other teachers. Resources can take a number of forms, such as student learning data, space, time, technical manuals, web sites, contacts at other schools or

levels of the school system, secretarial assistance, and, of course, professional development. One principal we know meets every year with the office staff and the coach to clarify what resources the coach has authority over and procedures for the coach to access those resources.

5. Maintain the focus on instructional leadership.

Rather than involving coaches in operational tasks, such as inventorying textbooks, substituting for the principal at meetings out of the building, or dealing with discipline referrals, coaches should be involved in activities directly related to improving teaching and learning. Don't allow "emergencies," when everyone must pitch in beyond their usual responsibilities, to become routine.

Use the plan developed by the coach and principal to focus on the coach's primary responsibilities, such as:

- Helping staff see how a new instructional approach relates to the shared vision for student learning;
- Leading decision making about the school's professional learning plan;
- Designing professional learning experiences;
- Facilitating groups to examine, design, and use appropriate teaching and learning strategies;
- Being available daily to answer teachers' questions about teaching and learning;
- Mentoring new teachers;
- Working with individual teachers who request assistance;
- Pulling together assessment data

for teachers to use in their decision making;

- Seeking outside resources to support teachers;
- Building relationships with parents and community members to support student learning;
- Working with central office leaders to ensure school goals align with local, state, and national standards; and
- Advocating beyond the school for policies and resources that support the staff's shared vision for student learning.

6. Help maintain balance to avoid overload.

Principals can help coaches avoid overload by monitoring their own reliance on coaches and not giving coaches additional tasks as they perform initial tasks well. Here are ways principals can help coaches balance their personal and professional lives:

- Encouraging coaches to block out time for personal activities not directly related to education, such as a sport, volunteering, or crafts. Model a balance between one's professional and personal pursuits;
- Coaching school-based coaches in delegating. Model effective delegation and share ways to use specific strategies. Help coaches set contact parameters when they are away from the school or in meetings;
- Asking coaches to help develop teacher leaders by scheduling opportunities for others to represent the team, department, or a project in meetings;
- Recommending that coaches socialize with non-educators so they are not always "talking shop;" and
- Promoting a broader view gained by reading widely.

7. Protect the coach's relationships with peers.

One principal we know meets every year with the office staff and the coach to clarify what resources the coach has authority over and procedures for the coach to access those resources.

ANITA PANKAKE is a professor and doctoral program director in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Texas Pan American. You can contact her at 1201 West University Drive, Edinburg, TX 78541, 956-292-7417, fax 956-381-2941, e-mail: apankake@utpa.edu.

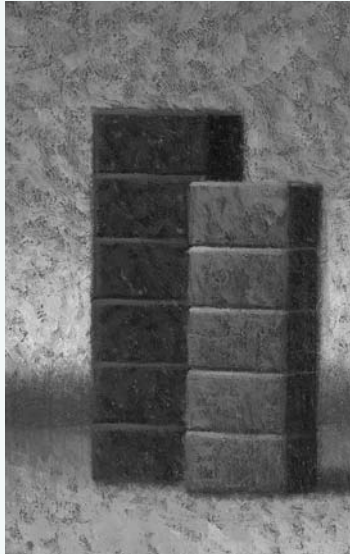
GAYLE MOLLER is associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations at Western Carolina University. You can contact her at 237 Killian Bldg., Cullowhee, NC 28723, 828-227-2115, fax 828-227-7607, e-mail: moller@email.wcu.edu.

Teacher leaders discuss principals

Examples of principals' actions and reflections from teacher leaders (Teacher Leader Network, www.teacherleaders.org) show how these strategies can emerge within the school.

"I do not consider myself a part of the administration. I am the instructional leader in my building. That's the way the administration refers to me and I refer to myself. ... It is rare that I perform administrative duties. The reports, plans, etc. that I develop/implement are all based in curriculum or student achievement."

— Christina M. Hunter, Greenville, S.C.



"When I took on my job as a reading specialist, I asked to be able to teach a class. My principal was used to having a 'third administrator' who could do things like lunch duty, but I truly believe the fact that I teach two periods a day makes me credible to my staff. They know my door is always open and they can observe me readily, and they do!"

— Mary Anne Kosmoski, district resource teacher, Tampa, Fla.

"The attitudes and issues (the teacher leader) faces are dependent upon a multitude of factors. What is the existing culture of the school? The attitudes of the existing faculty? Their own attitudes? Are they inserted as 'special' people a la crown prince status, or are they simply added to the staff with little fuss or fanfare? ... a savior getting ready to ride in and 'fix' the school with their great knowledge, or are they coming in looking to build relationships over time to effect change more naturally?"

— Ellen Berg, 8th-grade language arts and social studies, San Diego, Calif.

The change in coaches' roles and responsibilities often makes them uneasy in new relationships with colleagues. While formal coaching roles are becoming more common, most school cultures still support an egalitarian view where all teachers are the same. Anticipating these tenuous peer relationships, the principal can work to build the coach's confidence. The principal can help by:

- **Share information.**

Coaches may need information about peers' obligations at school, school district policies, rules and regu-

lations, budget parameters, and existing conflicts among faculty members and/or work units. Well-informed coaches can make better decisions.

- **Assign low-risk tasks initially to ensure the coach's success.**

Begin with low-risk assignments that don't require complex leadership skills, such as working with a volunteer group of teachers on a committee; facilitating a team or department already engaged in conversations about teaching and learning; or leading the revision or updating of an existing policy or handbook.

- **Celebrate even small successes.**

One-on-one verbal praise, notes, e-mails with specific feedback, and phone calls are appropriate, private, and avoid the public attention coaches often believe can divide them and other teachers.

- **Find opportunities for sharing.**

As coaches gain confidence in their work, find opportunities for them to share their successes through presentations to the school board, in district staff development workshops, or at professional conferences.

8. Provide leadership development opportunities.

School-based coaches need support in building leadership skills. Just because teachers are confident in leading students does not mean they know how to lead adults. Principals can coach the coaches or find other opportunities for them to learn to work with diverse adult perspectives, to make public presentations, and to navigate relationships with reticent teachers. The Pasco County, Fla., district created an intensive leadership development program specifically for the district's reading coaches. The coaches assessed their leadership skills, learned how to facilitate groups, and developed action plans to use in the schools they served.

PRINCIPALS AND COACHES AS PARTNERS

To take full advantage of school-based coaches, principals must provide them with appropriate support. These eight strategies help create a context in which a school-based coach can thrive and help build leadership capacity among all professional staff.

REFERENCE

Moller, G. & Pankake, A. (2006). *Lead with me: A principal's guide to teacher leadership*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. ■