



ASK

Cathy Toll

EFFECTIVE COACHING BEGINS WITH THE HIRING PROCESS

Coaching is a powerful professional learning strategy, but the process is only as effective as the coaches who lead it. It's worth investing time in hiring the right coaches because they can have an impact on the whole school. We asked Cathy Toll, director of Partnering to Learn and an expert on coaching, what school and district leaders need to know when hiring.

There are two things that are unique to interviewing potential coaches: Be clear about the position, and ask questions appropriate to the work.

Q: How do you find and hire great instructional coaches?

A: Finding the right person to do the job is a commonsense goal, but it isn't always easy. Not only do coaches need to have successful teaching experience, there are additional demands of coaching that not all good teachers possess. To make sure you get the right person, three components are essential to the hiring process: the job description, enumeration of the qualities of effective coaches, and an effective interview.

THE JOB DESCRIPTION

A first step is to have a clear understanding of the job and a written job description. Most job descriptions provide a list of duties, but you should also include how those duties will be met, in terms of time and process. For instance, if one of the duties is to support teachers in implementing effective instruction, indicate what percent of the coach's time would be allocated to that duty and how — for example, by demonstrating effective instruction, working with small teams to study effective instruction, or meeting with teachers in coaching conversations.

I am surprised by how many coaches work without a job description. I find that many leaders lack information necessary to develop an accurate job description for coaches. I encourage leaders to work with others in developing the description, especially coaches themselves. Additional help could come from curricular leads, professional organizations, and faculty at nearby universities.

Be sure to articulate how the coach will be evaluated. In many schools, coaches are considered teachers and therefore are evaluated using the teacher evaluation system. This is frequently awkward and sometimes unfair to coaches because their jobs are so different from classroom teachers. If at all possible, use evaluation methods tailored to coaches. If you are required to use the teachers' evaluation form, adjust some items or collect additional evidence of coaching success.

ESSENTIAL QUALITIES

In my work with thousands of coaches in the U.S. and beyond, I have noticed that those who



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succeed have three personal qualities that you can remember with the acronym CAT:

- **Connectedness:** They want to connect with others.
- **Acceptance:** They turn off their judging mind, assume good intentions, and accept the people they work with.
- **Trustworthiness:** They make teachers feel comfortable and will keep teachers' information confidential.

Hiring a coach who already seems to have these qualities optimizes the chances for coaching success. But sometimes principals will need to help develop the qualities.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Principles of good interviewing apply to hiring educational coaches: Interview with a team to get input from multiple stakeholders, ask open-ended questions, allow time to answer the candidate's questions. But there are two things that are unique to interviewing potential coaches: Be clear about the position, and ask questions appropriate to the work.

Hiring a coach reflects a considerable investment, but it is worthwhile.

A coach who is not ready for the work will not only be ineffective but can damage teachers' understanding of coaching and have long-term consequences for their work with other coaches.

When the right coach is selected, there is potential for a big difference in the school. Effective coaches support teachers in ways that make a difference for students — and that's what we all want.

10 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO ASK POTENTIAL COACHES

The following questions form the basis for a helpful hiring conversation. They should be supplemented with additional questions about the specific content expertise sought (for example, for a math coach, an additional question would be "What is the goal of high-quality math instruction?") and about the specific needs of your school, staff, and students.

1 ASK: Describe your understanding of effective coaching: What is it and how does it look in practice?

LISTEN FOR: Coach as partner; focus on problem-solving; goal of enhancing teacher success.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Coach tells teachers what to do; coach determines how teachers need to grow; coach spends time with students unless providing demonstration.

2 ASK: What qualities do you have that would make you an effective coach?

LISTEN FOR: Trustworthy; listener; effective questioner; collaborator; relationship builder.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Candidate seems to think she knows more than others or knows what teachers need; plans to evaluate teachers; focuses only on her teaching skill and not coaching attributes.

3 ASK: Please give an example of a time when you connected well with a professional colleague. How do you know you connected well?

LISTEN FOR: Colleague opened up to the candidate; colleague

expressed appreciation of the interaction; colleague returned another time to talk further.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Top-down interactions in which the candidate was in charge; superficial interactions; focus on goal or product of a shared task rather than interpersonal connections.

4 ASK: What do you expect your schedule would look like on a typical day as a coach?

LISTEN FOR: Time to meet with teachers; coaching conversations; collaborating with teams; demonstration lessons; support of new teachers.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Time mainly spent in classrooms providing demonstration lessons; time mainly spent working with students; focus on observation in classrooms.

5 ASK: What would you do if a teacher told you he or she didn't want to work with you?

LISTEN FOR: Learning more; listening carefully; patience; getting to know the teacher; collaboration outside of coaching — e.g. study groups or teaming.

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BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Reporting to principal; determining teacher is uncoachable; pointing out teacher's weaknesses as evidence that they need coaching.

6 ASK: **What would you do if a teacher had a different approach to instruction or a different class management style than you?**

LISTEN FOR: Listen to understand; recognize there is more than one approach; accept teacher where he or she is; collaborate for growth.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Desire to get teacher to see things the coach's way; avoid working with the teacher; get into the classroom and fix things.

7 ASK: **What would you do if a teacher told you she wanted you to come into her classroom and work with a small group of students?**

LISTEN FOR: Graceful explanation of why that is not the coach's role; coach's inquiry into why additional

help is requested; listening to teacher's needs; distinction between coaching role and other duties, such as intervention, during which small-group instruction would be appropriate.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Eager acceptance of daily duties that involve teaching a small group.

8 ASK: **Tell me about your own professional learning. How do you learn best? What have you learned recently? What would you like to learn about as a coach?**

LISTEN FOR: Understanding of self as learner; eagerness to continue learning; learning related to coaching — e.g. adult learning theory, coaching practice, collaboration, professional teaming — and not just related to teaching.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Focus on teaching rather than coaching; inability to describe self as learner; lack of understanding of areas for future learning.

9 ASK: **How would you know you are effective as a coach?**

LISTEN FOR: Inquiring of colleagues and principal; collecting evidence based upon clear outcomes; observable (looks like/sounds like) evidence.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Formal teacher evaluation; "I just know"; vague feelings of success.

10 ASK: **How would you advocate for equity as a coach?**

LISTEN FOR: Collaborative inquiry; working toward school vision/mission; demonstrating own practices; looking closely at student data/evidence; creating possibility — visits to other schools, viewing video, etc.; creating equitable learning environment; tools/resources such as Teaching Tolerance, Rethinking Schools.

BE CAUTIOUS ABOUT: Assuming that equitable beliefs/practices can be demanded by coach; seeking superficial changes; statement that the school "has no diversity." ■

CALL TO ACTION / Denise Glyn Borders

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systems" across the globe (OECD, 2019, p. 153).

As your champion, Learning Forward commits to deepen its engagement in research and evidence so we all become stronger partners in professional learning. I welcome your input and feedback.

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WHAT I'VE LEARNED / Elena Aguilar

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mutuality, appreciation, and learner orientation. Regular and intentional practice strengthens these dispositions.

To do this essential work of coaching for equity, we all have a great deal to learn. These aren't skills most

of us have acquired yet, but we can develop them. In schools where coaches work effectively within an equity lens, children and adults thrive and inequities decrease. This is perhaps what we need to know most: We *can* coach for equity and create equitable schools.

REFERENCE

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