



To coach for equity, you must see inequities, understand how they were constructed, and know why they perpetuate.

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WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Elena Aguilar

YOU CAN COACH FOR EQUITY ANYWHERE, WITH ANYONE

To create the schools children deserve, we must coach educators and leaders for equity. It isn't an option for coaches to be neutral on issues of justice — and there are injustices occurring in almost every school, every day. It's our moral and professional obligation to lead and coach in a way that surfaces and interrupts these inequities.

Every conversation I have in and about schools is a conversation about equity. Always looking through an equity lens, I notice who is sitting where, who is raising his, her, or their hand, who is being yelled at, who is reading what, who is playing with whom, who is in the front office waiting for the principal.

I think about how teachers explain concepts and check for understanding, what they assign for reading, whom they praise and why, what they are doing during professional learning time. I process what I see through my understandings of race, institutional racism, implicit bias, stereotype threat, white supremacy, and other frameworks to make sense of what I see — and, perhaps most important, to figure out how to interrupt the inequities.

Because equity issues are present in every situation, I am coaching for equity in every coaching conversation. We live in a society that is deeply inequitable, in which systems of oppression (including racism, patriarchy, and classism) are embedded in our mindsets, behaviors, and institutions, but we often don't recognize the prevalence of this systemic oppression.

This is why we, as coaches and leaders, must make it visible. To coach for equity, you must see inequities, understand how they were constructed, and know why they perpetuate.

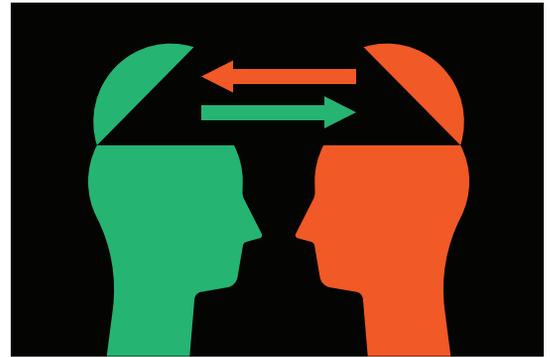
While it's helpful to be in a system or around leaders who hold equity at the center, these conditions aren't essential if you want to coach for equity. Ultimately, you can coach for equity anywhere, with anyone. It's about what you pay attention to and what you say about what you see and hear.

WHAT IS EQUITY?

Educational equity means that all students receive whatever they need every day to develop to their full academic and social potential and thrive. By thrive, I mean academically as well as socially and emotionally. Every child has a right to feel loved and cared for and to feel that they belong to a community. Emotional well-being is as important as academic success in my definition of educational equity.

Achieving educational equity would mean that there is no predictability of success or failure based on social or cultural factors like race, ethnicity, linguistic background, economic class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and physical and cognitive ability. Here are some examples of educational equity:

- A Latinx child who enters kindergarten speaking only Spanish performs as well on reading assessments in 3rd grade as her native English-speaking counterparts.
- An African American teen is just as likely as his white or Asian classmates to enroll



and thrive in an engineering program in high school.

- Girls are equally represented in advanced math courses — and are equally as successful as their male classmates.
- There's proportionality in the demographics of kids sent to the office: If a district's African American population is 20%, then at most 20% of office referrals are for African American students.

Educational equity also means that all children are seen for who they are and schools surface and cultivate their unique interests and gifts. For this to happen, children need access to an extensive range of learning opportunities, activities, and materials as vehicles to self-realization and freedom.

HOW CAN I COACH FOR EQUITY?

Coaching for equity requires a robust tool set. First, you need to know what equity and inequity look and sound like. The ability to recognize these patterns is affected by your personal identity markers, so before and during any work around educational equity, you need to reflect on and cultivate deep awareness of your sociopolitical identity markers, including your own racial identity. This is meaningful work in and of itself.

You also need foundational coaching skills — a refined ability to listen, a variety of frameworks through which you can make sense of what you hear, and a repertoire of question stems that cultivate dialogue.

Coaching for equity requires professional learning and ongoing practice and feedback from trusted colleagues.

5 TIPS ON COACHING FOR EQUITY

I'm writing my next book, *Coaching for Equity* (Jossey-Bass, in press), and so I have many suggestions for how to have coaching conversations about equity. Here are five of my top tips.

Attend to emotions. Conversations about equity will raise emotions in you and in your coachees. Learning about emotions — how to respond productively and how to support someone else to recognize and engage with them — will make all the difference in coaching for equity. It's very likely that you and your coachee will feel angry, sad, nervous, impatient, confused, and a whole lot more. I've seen many coaching conversations derailed by an inadequate tool set for responding to emotions.

Build trust. A high degree of trust between you and your coachee is critical for you to coach effectively, especially if you're committed to coaching for equity. There are many ways to build trust. We feel trust when people keep their word and honor their commitments, are transparent and don't harbor a hidden agenda, and when we can see that someone can and will do what they say they're going to do.

Know how to respond to the question, "Do you think I'm racist?" As a coach, I'm often asked some form of this question. To engage with this question, you need to know what racism is. You also need to know what implicit bias is and how white supremacy manifests in our schools and a whole lot more — and so you need to be prepared. As you do that learning, here are some ways to respond to this question:

- Tell me more about where that question is coming from.
- Let's unpack that concept first.

What is a racist? What do you think racists think, feel, and do?

- Maybe. Am I understanding that this is something you want to explore? What might you have to gain, or how would you benefit, from digging into this question?
- What would it mean to you if you are racist?
- What do you really want to know about yourself? What are you curious to discover?
- Yes, you probably are. To some degree, we all are.

As you read some of these, you might have thought, *I could never say that!* I want to challenge you to try some of them. You might be surprised at how effective they are at opening up conversation.

Gather data. If you want to help a coachee interrupt inequitable practices, you'll likely need to gather the data that illustrate these inequities. There are many kinds of data that can reveal inequities, from video to surveys to teacher-to-student interaction data to disaggregated office referral data. Knowing what to gather and how to facilitate a meaningful discussion of this data with a client is essential.

Hone your coach dispositions. Who you are as a coach — your way of being — has a tremendous impact on the quality of your coaching conversations. Fortunately, who you are is firmly within your sphere of control. I have identified six essential dispositions for coaches that lead to transformational conversations and are essential for equity conversations: compassion, curiosity, trust in the coaching process, humility and

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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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