



**The challenge and opportunity we're being offered in 2021 is to meet teachers where they are while supporting their sustained growth.**

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## COACHES CORNER

Sharron Helmke

# SUPPORT TEACHERS OR CHALLENGE THEM? WE CAN DO BOTH

**T**raditionally we welcome each new year as a fresh start, and many of us looked forward to 2021 with that same sense of hope, albeit more guarded than usual. Then, the insurrection at the Capitol on Jan. 6 brought us yet *another* example of the fragility of things we often take for granted.

Many of us held our breath until Jan. 20, when we witnessed restoration of the fundamental bedrock of our democracy. This year's Inauguration Day was different than previous ceremonies, and even as we lament this and our many other losses, we are reminded that resilience is possible. In the eloquent words of inaugural poet Amanda

Gorman:

*The new dawn blooms as we free it  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it  
If only we're brave enough to be it*

So we move bravely into a new year, allowing our grief over losses both great and small to become the foundation of our resilience, shining light on whatever is within our personal reach.

My light is coaching, and I've been offered a way to shine that light in this recurring space to offer timely inspiration for coaches. As a coach, coaching consultant, and coach of coaches, it's my intention

to challenge you to consider *every* coaching conversation an opportunity to brighten the light of your own coaching skills while supporting the growth of others. My coaching intention for 2021 is to fully embrace my role as an agent of professional learning and catalyst for positive change. I invite you to join me in this intention or any variation that suits your situation.

I feel a need to recommit myself to the full potential of coaching because school closures in the spring thrust many coaches, including me, into the role of lifeguard, helping teachers stay afloat in a sea of change and technology demands. Teachers needed coaches to be resource providers and technology supporters. This was the most pressing work, and we rose to it.

But as the immediacy of the spring shutdown drifted into the past and a new school year began, a new perspective began to emerge. I continued to hear from coaches supporting teachers' most immediate and stress-inducing needs, but I also heard from others looking to move beyond immediate needs toward longer-term goals, a "growing ourselves out of our problems" mindset. They argued we need to remember we are professional *learning* communities — we identify challenges and *learn* our way through them.

It seemed proponents almost exclusively held either one view or the other, and the choice determined whether coaches functioned primarily as resource providers and technology supporters or whether they were inviting teachers into problem-based inquiry and new learning.

As we consider how to best navigate 2021, it's time to take an inclusive view, asking what doing both — supporting and challenging — might look and sound like. It starts with recognizing there is no campuswide answer. Some teachers will need continued resource and technology support, while others may be ready — even eager — to take a more aggressive approach toward both immediate and systemic challenges using inquiry-based learning.

Coaches understand that sometimes the only way to improve a situation is to shift our

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**3. IDENTIFY PATHWAYS.**

We also need to see one or more pathways to the goal we have set so that we have a clear picture of how to reach it. When coaches partner with others to identify strategies for reaching goals, they foster hope. Sometimes this involves asking questions, such as: What advice would you give someone else with your goal? What have you done in the past to successfully meet challenges like this? (Campbell & Van Nieuwerburgh, 2018).

When necessary, coaches can suggest strategies teachers might try. However, how they share that knowledge is a complex communication challenge. If they direct teachers or act like know-it-alls, coaches take away ownership of the goal and, ultimately, take away hope.

**4. TAKE ACTION.**

Hope also requires that we believe we can get to our goal by taking the necessary steps along the path. The clearer the path, the more agency and confidence we'll have.

Coaches can make the pathway easier to follow by helping teachers

plan implementation of a strategy, explaining and modeling teaching strategies, and gathering data so that teachers can see their progress. Seeing our progress makes us more likely to believe that achieving the goal is possible.

In most cases, the best way to build momentum and deepen our agency is to take tiny steps forward and see the positive results. Coaches can help in this process by sharing specific, concrete, positive feedback. One true, specific observation delivered at the right time in the right way can stay with a person for a lifetime.

**BE BRAVE**

These are tough times, and that makes it all the more important to foster hope in others — and in ourselves. All of the strategies I've shared here can and should be applied by coaches and other professional learning leaders as well as teachers.

It takes bravery to persevere. But when we find the courage to look at reality, set goals, identify pathways, and build agency, we can foster hope. As

educators, we need to feel hope, because there is a lot worth doing.

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 perspective on it. Powerful questions can do this by fostering new insights. Knowing this allows us to support teachers by offering a question, in addition to — or even rather than — an offer of help. Questions like: Who's showing up but not yet mastering the content, and what do their mistakes tell us about their learning needs? What

assumptions are we making about our students, and what choices are we making based on those assumptions? How do we more effectively balance perspectives and voices in our planning meetings so our learning designs are more inclusive?

The challenge and opportunity we're being offered in 2021 is to meet teachers where they are while

supporting their sustained growth. We're being called to be both a supporter and a catalyst for change, to coach for growth *with compassion and situational awareness.* Meeting the need to embody these two roles, often considered opposites, will require we use 2021 to brighten both our coaching instincts and skills. ■

**EQUITY IN FOCUS** / Angela M. Ward

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 personal sphere of influence to change the system and dismantle inequitable practices. Actions speak louder than words, so adjust your goals and objectives to hold yourself accountable and do your part to shape the learning environments where students feel safe, welcome, and included.

I hold myself accountable to the students in my care by working from my personal sphere of influence to dismantle inequity in our educational system. In the professional learning I facilitate, I pivot from the traditional approach of scripted lessons and strategies to center personal stories and connections. I invite colleagues to share their experiences and

stories to introduce new perspectives on longstanding issues. They enter these learning sessions often unaware of the ways institutional racism impacts them daily, but they leave with a collective commitment to improve educational practice. ■