



KEEP GROWING

Jim Knight

THE MORAL UNIVERSE WON'T BUDGE UNLESS WE MOVE IT

"[T]he arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

—Martin Luther King Jr.

Coaches, like everyone in our educational organizations, can and should analyze their schools for evidence of structural racism and then fight for change until the system changes.

Do you agree with King's often-quoted statement? In light of the heartbreaking and racist events I see in the news almost daily, I can't say I'm sure. What I do believe, however, is that the moral universe will not budge unless people act in ways that move it toward justice — people like you and me, people like instructional coaches.

As change leaders, instructional coaches are perfectly positioned to move their organizations forward. Coaches, like everyone in our educational organizations, can and should analyze their schools for evidence of structural racism and then fight for change until the system changes.

Coaches can raise awareness of prejudice by first learning about their own biases (Eberhardt, 2019; Project Implicit, 2011) and then partnering with others in coaching cycles that surface implicit bias. Also, coaches can advocate for justice by distinguishing between two kinds of power: *power over* and *power with*.

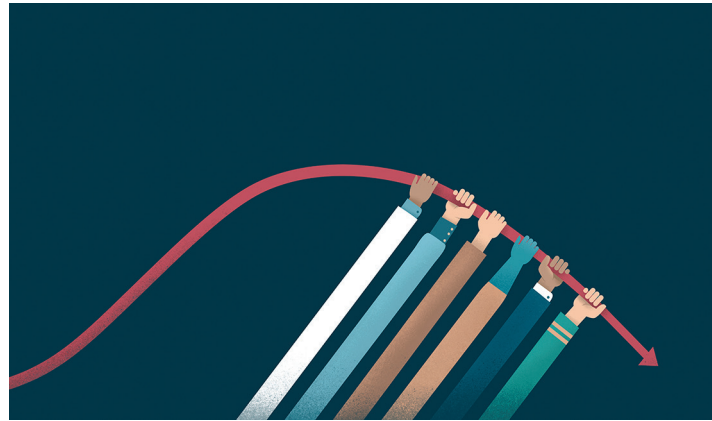
Power over is coercive power used to keep students in line. Teachers with a *power over* orientation communicate to students that they must do what they are told because they do not have power. In contrast, *power with* is authentic power that grows out of real relationships *with* students. Teachers who have a *power with* orientation demonstrate empathy, build connections, and respect their students (Knight, 2013).

Microaggressions are an especially pernicious form of *power over* (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are brief, intentional or unintentional, common forms of abuse directed at groups or individuals. In the classroom, microaggressions can include "calling on and validating one gender, class, race of students

while ignoring other students, singling students out in class because of their background, or setting low expectations for particular groups" (Portman et al., n.d.).

The "micro" morpheme might lead people to think that microaggressions are trivial. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Ibram X. Kendi writes, a "persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor. ... Abuse accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide" (Kendi, 2019, p. 47).

Coaches can promote *power with* by partnering with teachers to help them replace microaggressions with what I refer to as microaffirmations. These are actions and words that communicate that we see the dignity, value, and humanity of others. Microaffirmations include giving someone our full attention, authentic affirmative words, and paraphrasing what others say in ways that communicate that we have deeply heard what they have said.



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Coaches can help teachers decrease microaggressions and increase microaffirmations by conducting an interaction analysis: recording lessons so that teachers can look at each of their interactions to determine whether they build connection or disconnection.

Coaches can empower teachers to take this analysis further by giving teachers a list of reflection questions to consider as they watch each interaction, including such questions as: Did I give my students my full attention when they were talking? Did I affirm students when they contributed to classroom discussion? Did I refrain from interrupting students? Did I avoid sarcasm, singling students out, power-tripping, or other actions that communicate a lack of respect? Did I communicate the same degree of

respect to all students (Knight, 2013)?

Will the arc of the moral universe bend toward justice? I hope so. Today, though, we can do many things to make it much more likely that King's predictions will come true in our schools. By partnering with teachers to promote *power with*, we can make a difference. Maybe we won't change the whole universe. But we can change ourselves, and, in so doing, we can change others. If enough of us do that, our universe will move toward justice.

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Coming in August: Jim Knight will explore how the inside-out approach, described in the February issue, applies to schoolwide change. ■

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