



COACHES CORNER

Sharron Helmke

SHOW YOURSELF THAT WHAT YOU DO MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Coaches are called upon to meet teachers' needs, but we have some of the same needs in our own professional lives. One of those needs is validation that our efforts are making a difference.

That's often harder to find for coaches than for teachers, who can see their impact on an almost daily basis — the aha moments of students, the notes and drawings left on our desks, the growth in our student outcomes, and more.

Where does a coach find proof of impact? Coaching takes place behind the scenes, supporting teachers' mental processes and problem-solving skills. The ideas generated in a coaching session rightfully belong to the teacher, as does the successful implementation and outcomes of those ideas.

Teachers deserve praise for making changes in their practice and student outcomes, but coaching's impact on those successes is often left unspoken. That can leave coaches feeling underappreciated or even unsure about whether we're making a difference at all.

This lack of acknowledgement can hit especially hard around late October, when early feelings of excitement and optimism wane as coaches recognize the difficulty of making meaningful and sustained growth across the school. The road ahead can begin to look very long, dark, and isolated. We may experience a lack of efficacy and fulfillment.

To experience the work and its impact differently requires self-reflection and choosing an intentional shift in perspective. Start by thinking about where you can observe the impacts of your efforts. Perhaps you identify a teacher with whom you have enjoyable, almost effortless coaching conversations that really spark the teacher's creativity. Those kinds of interactions tend to result, almost immediately, in visible impact on instruction.

When you need a lift, spend a few minutes in that teacher's classroom observing effective instruction. If time permits, spend a few minutes in conversation, absorbing

some of the teacher's enthusiasm for learning and growth. Not only will you get an immediate boost of positivity, but also affirmation of the value of growth mindset, professional learning, and improved practice — the interaction that forms the heart and soul of coaching.

Next, examine the expectations and beliefs that have given rise to these feelings. Be willing to let go of those that are unrealistic and self-sabotaging. Make a list of the expectations placed

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to learn. It forces adults to recognize that they often use the concept of “self-management” to rationalize their desire for student compliance instead of engaging in dialogue and navigating conflict that occurs when compliance is demanded of the student.

An adult on an antiracist SEL journey gets curious about (and critical of) traditional approaches to discipline. They might ask: What does “behave” mean to me? Who defines “behave”? Who determines when behavior is out of compliance with our classroom community expectations? Who are the members of this community and would they agree? How might members of this community exist in this space versus spaces outside this community, and how does that impact their ability to be successful in school and life outside school?

When I was a public school administrator with a desire to nurture

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a humanizing culture in schools, I was given the charge to develop a restorative practices focus across the district. SEL became the foundation my colleagues and I used. We took on this charge with the belief that restorative practices and social and emotional learning are not programs, but ways of being.

Both ways of being fit nicely into the structure of a strong Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), so we set out to create an MTSS that responded to the cultural needs of students of all races, backgrounds, and personal needs. SEL can be a strong foundation to any program or intervention, but it must center practices to nurture school environments that are identity-safe for

everyone.

To make SEL truly antiracist, adults must engage in critical self-reflection, individually and in professional learning communities. Learning in community offers teachers multiple perspectives and windows into the ways of being of people who have different backgrounds. It is the critical self-reflection that allows adults to uncover ways to meet students where they are in a learning partnership.

SEL traditionally was seen as a program that would make students feel like they belong and that it would feel good to go to school daily. Critical self-reflection invites teachers, instructional coaches, and school leaders to get curious and ask, “Do all children in our care feel like they belong, and does going to school daily feel good?” The answer will not always be yes. When it isn’t, an antiracist approach to SEL can give educators the ability to make needed change for student success. ■

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on you (by yourself and others) and responsibilities you assume in your role.

Now compare that list to your official job description. If you are taking on more than intended, unrealistic goals or workload could be hurting your self-efficacy. “Job creep” is a real thing, and it can rob us of our sense of fulfillment and belief in our ability to succeed (Wolverton, 2019).

Note which responsibilities are not stated in your job description and ask yourself where they have come from. Are they self-imposed? If not, do they come from administrators or teachers? Once you have determined those answers, have conversations with stakeholders (and with yourself!) to reset reasonable expectations that

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will increase your well-being and your impact.

Finally, identify where you will you go and what you will do when feelings of frustration, doubt, or overwhelm surface. Who is in your support network? Is it other coaches, professional learning leaders, a national organization like Learning Forward? Whoever you identify, talk with them *before* you run into challenges and make a plan for how they can support you by helping you shift your perspective

(Suttie, 2021).

With these strategies and others, you can build your resilience and stay in touch with the meaning and fulfillment of your work as a coach. Just as flight attendants tell us, only by putting on your own oxygen mask first can you help others.

REFERENCES

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