3 challenges new coaches face
— and how to overcome them

BY LISA L. ORTMANN, KATHERINE BRODEUR, AND SUSAN L. MASSEY

Instructional coaches provide a unique and powerful form of support that can help teachers transform their practice, tackle new initiatives, and learn from one another. But coaches themselves often lack access to the support they need and deserve for coaching to have maximal impact.

Typically, coaches have minimal preparation for the job and receive little ongoing guidance once they have started. Even with a clear understanding of the logistics and goals of a coaching program, many novice coaches still face challenges finding their stride.

We work with practicing teachers learning to become coaches in graduate programs and through professional learning initiatives in multiple school districts. We are also engaged in an

ongoing research study of new coach development. Over the last five years, we have observed some common patterns in coaches' learning (Ortmann et. al, 2020).

Regardless of their years of teaching experience, school and community contexts, and specific coaching goals, coaches tend to move from scripted, tentative conversations with teachers to more fluid, targeted dialogue about teaching. In this process of growth, we have found that new coaches tend to struggle with common challenges. That pattern creates an opportunity to address those challenges proactively and systemically so that coaches can have productive relationships with teachers right away.

NAMING THE CHALLENGES

In our work, we have seen three areas where novice coaches tend to struggle the most.

First is the challenge of taking a collaborative stance during coaching conversations with teachers. In a collaborative stance, the coach works with the teacher to identify problems of practice and co-create strategies and next steps (L'Allier & Elish-Piper, 2012; Lipton & Wellman, 2007).

A collaborative stance can be distinguished from a facilitating stance, in which the coach asks open-ended questions and follows the teachers'

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reflections, and a consulting stance, in which the coach takes the lead in providing information and strategies for the teacher to consider.

The collaborative stance signals respect because it helps to equalize power dynamics, and it is essential for professionally rich, collegial relationships to flourish (Lipton & Wellman, 2007). While successful use of all three stances is most effective at supporting the aims of coaching (L'Allier & Elish-Piper, 2012), the collaborative stance has the most potential for supporting innovation in the classroom.

New coaches are often surprised that the collaborative stance is challenging because teachers who become coaches typically value collaboration, have strong bonds with their teaching colleagues, and engage willingly in cooperative learning and problem-solving. But the change of role from teacher to coach dramatically shifts the dynamics of existing relationships. For example, teachers may now perceive the coach, who was

once a confidant, as an "authority" and feel intimidated or vulnerable.

The second challenge is being responsive in a collegial conversation, and it is also more of a struggle than many novice coaches expect. New coaches initially tend to stick to a coaching "script" to set and reach goals in the precious, limited time they have with teachers rather than listening carefully for teachers' cues.

Such listening is an important skill because initial goals sometimes must take a backseat to pressing needs in a teacher's classroom. If a struggling teacher does not feel heard, he is less likely to hear the coach's message or place trust in the coach going forward.

The third challenge is providing constructive and directive feedback. It is layered with interpersonal challenges, so it is no wonder that new coaches often struggle with it. New coaches may doubt that they know enough about the subject area, grade level, or students to offer meaningful feedback. They may also worry that their suggestions will be interpreted with offense.

As a result, we sometimes see them default to a cheerleader role. While starting with the teacher's strengths is an essential coaching practice (L'Allier & Elish-Piper, 2012) and coaches should seek to balance directive and responsive feedback on instruction (Ippolito, 2010),
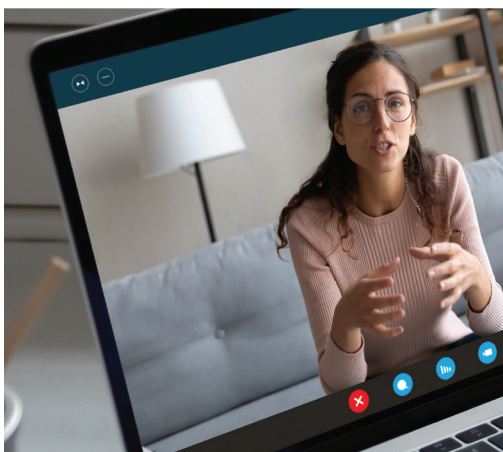
avoiding directive feedback altogether is counterproductive to the goals of professional learning because it can confuse teachers, skirt important issues, and ultimately make the coaching process irrelevant.

HOW LEADERS CAN SUPPORT COACH LEARNING

Leaders can support coaches' development first and foremost through conversation and reflection. For starters, talking through the inevitable shift in relational dynamics can help new coaches relax and discover new ways to collaborate with their colleagues.

To help coaches feel comfortable providing directive feedback, leaders can encourage them to plan and write down their feedback before the conversation with the teacher, perhaps using visual displays of observation data, such as tallies of questions asked or flow maps of a teacher's movement in the classroom.

Just as importantly, leaders should encourage new coaches to trust their instincts and celebrate successes, both of which can begin to build coaches' self-efficacy. For reflection questions and discussion prompts to guide these conversations, see the sidebar at right.

In addition to dialogue and reflection, leaders can incorporate professional learning designed to enhance new coach development. We have used all of the following methods in our work with new coaches (see Massey et al., 2020) and have been amazed at the impact a few purposefully designed learning experiences can have on coaching effectiveness.

Video analysis of coaching practice is just as valuable as it is for teaching practice because it provides an objective way to examine coaching practice and focus the coach's reflection on his or her practice (Tripp & Rich, 2012). It is particularly helpful for examining subtle and nonverbal forms of communication that influence the coach-teacher relationship.

During a coaching conversation, a coach may be so focused on the goals that she loses sight of the way in which she is communicating those goals. She may also fail to see teachers' subtle cues about lack of trust or disengagement, which can include shifting of eyes, leaning back in the chair, or passive statements of agreement ("uh-huh").

Video analysis gives the coach a chance to examine those forms of nonverbal communication to course-correct and be more aware in the future and also to recognize and disrupt any misunderstandings that might evolve from cross-cultural communication differences.

Analyzing the written transcript of a coaching session provides a complementary perspective because it homes in on the content and dialogue of the coaching conversation and focuses inquiry on the discourse patterns in which the coach tends to engage (Kucan, 2007). The coach can examine the pattern of communication, including how questions were posed and how the teacher responded, and reflect on the specific language moves that did and didn't help the conversation progress toward the goals of the coaching cycle.

Studying the language patterns of other effective coaches also provides coaches with new models for moves to add to their repertoire and builds a broader awareness of the art in the coaching conversation itself.

Role-playing is an active learning strategy in which pairs or groups of coaches take turns in the position of teacher and that of a coach. It provides an opportunity to practice and reflect. For example, practicing the shift between responsive questions and directive suggestions can help new coaches get a feel for how to facilitate a balanced conversation (Ippolito, 2010).

Debriefing after the role-play can include identifying whether the method in a given coaching exchange was more directive or responsive and whether it fit the situation. Taking time to consciously step between the roles of coach and teacher is especially valuable for helping coaches recognize how they

REFLECTION QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Questions for coaches to reflect on coaching stance

- What was the ratio of coach talk to teacher talk in the conversation?

- Whose ideas are driving the conversation?

- How are you and the teacher developing goals and determining progress toward the goals?

- Is there a balance in responsibility for next steps?

Questions for coaches to reflect on responsiveness

- When and how did the teacher cue for support? How did you respond?

- Did the conversation go off track? If so, was it addressing the teacher's concerns?

- What happened immediately after the conversation went off track?

Questions for coaches to reflect on feedback

- What did you notice about your nonverbal communication? The teacher's?

- What specific, observable details from the lesson did you seek to incorporate into the feedback?

- What was the ratio of affirmations to observations?

- How did the teacher respond to coaching questions and suggestions?

IDEAS

are positioning themselves as coaches.

Further, experiencing both sides of the coach-teacher dynamic will also allow coaches to explore the emotions that might come up in coaching conversations for teachers when they feel they are or aren't being listened to and practice effective ways to respond.

Professional learning networks are a valuable resource for coaches. School administrators may feel ill-equipped to answer new coaches' questions and respond to their specific dilemmas, so helping coaches seek out others in similar positions can help fill the gap.

Not only can professional networks provide mentorship for novice coaches, they are a much-needed avenue for ongoing professional learning and deep reflection about coaching practice (Bean et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2009). They can help counter feelings of isolation that are common among coaches, especially in a school or district with only one or a few coaches, strengthening coaches' self-efficacy and motivation to persevere through challenges.

Providing informal and formal opportunities to support coaches' ongoing development is a powerful way to support the learning culture of the school or district at large. Coaches are uniquely positioned to engage in dialogue with teachers that can move

professional learning forward through meaningful conversations. School leaders who invest in supporting coaches are also supporting individual teachers' development and, ultimately, students' learning.

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Group coaching builds connections

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