



Cultivate a culture of coaching

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At all times, but especially in today's shifting contexts created by the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers benefit from differentiated professional learning support. One way school leaders can ensure such support is to nurture a culture of coaching. By embracing instructional coaching and establishing it as part of the school culture, leaders can help teachers address

their evolving challenges and therefore meet students' needs.

To understand how to create a coaching culture, it's important to understand the overarching concept of school culture. School culture is a way of characterizing the teaching and learning environment. Consisting of the norms, values, expectations, and habits of the school, it can be described as "how things are done."

Culture lives and grows in the actions and interactions of the people who are part of the school. Although school culture is not always visible, it is easily and deeply felt. It can range from authoritarian and fearful to flexible and participatory — and everything in between.


School culture can either support or impede coaching work, sometimes in subtle ways. For example, in a school

culture that is rigidly hierarchical or highly focused on evaluation, teachers and staff may feel fearful about sharing their challenges and asking the questions that are vital for effective coaching.

Schools can also have a specific coaching culture, which is often dependent on the tone set by school administrators both explicitly and unintentionally. In a school with a supportive coaching culture, administrators model effective coaching in their relationships with their teachers. They ask questions that create opportunities for productive conversations — for example, using student data to probe teachers' thinking about their instructional practice and its impact on student learning.

By doing so, these school leaders nurture hidden talents and natural abilities of educators to grow their instructional expertise through meaningful reflection. These leaders may also explicitly empower coaching by collaborating with instructional coaches, ensuring that their role is supportive rather than evaluative, and encouraging teachers to meet with them.

On the other hand, some school administrators create a stigma around the work of coaches by using coaching conversations to inform evaluation or push forward an agenda that is removed from a teacher's student data. For example, when an administrator



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chooses the focus for a coaching conversation instead of allowing the teacher to choose the focus based on his or her student's data, the conversation loses authenticity and the practice undermines the coaching culture and inevitably results in a system failure.

Leaders can also unintentionally undermine coaching by failing to make time for coach-teacher conversations, asking coaches to fill in as substitutes or perform administrative tasks, or ignoring coaches' needs for support and growth.

In the following section, we use a gardening analogy to present strategies for how leaders can root instructional coaching in the school culture.



PREPARE THE SOIL

Establish healthy soil and you will grow beautiful things. That's as true in schools as it is in gardens. Think about your school culture as the soil in which your teachers and students grow. How does it feel? Is it hard and rocky? Is it soft and rich in nutrients? Now, how

do you need to improve that soil so that the seeds of success can blossom?

Preparing the soil means considering the attitude, philosophy, and actions needed to produce healthy coaching relationships. A supportive coaching culture starts with valuing people, identifying their strengths and needs, and having focused and open conversations about growth and support. A supportive coaching culture has shared positive accountability, relevance, and strong engagement and learning.

This involves uncovering the hidden talents, natural abilities, and gaps in knowledge of staff, and empowering teachers' voices. It also involves modeling a mindset of collaboration and coaching.



PLANT THE SEEDS

Once the ground is ready, it's time to plant the seeds. This means tending to the early stages of the coaching work. Invest in hiring a knowledgeable and well-prepared instructional coach. Then introduce the coach or coaches to the entire faculty and explicitly share your vision for coaching's role at your school. It's always a good idea to revisit roles and responsibilities as the teachers' and their students' needs arise or change.

The value of coaching at your school needs to be seen, heard, modeled, supported, and lived by all. If a coach is viewed as an extra body at the school,

coaching relationships will end up being a chore. On the other hand, if you value coaching, connect it to your school's goals and culture, and keep it specific to the students' learning and the teachers' instructional needs, it will flourish.

 **PROVIDE NOURISHMENT**

Just like a plant's roots need a balance of air, water, and sun, coaching needs a balance of space, support, and attention.

To give coaching air and room to grow, commit to it. Do not cram it in here and there whenever time allows it. Provide dedicated time for coaches and teachers to work together and for coaching relationships to flourish.

How can we water coaching? Start by choosing coaches with care — coaches who have the right skills and experiences to build relationships grounded in mutual respect. Then provide time for coaches to sharpen their craft by engaging in their own professional learning and time for teachers to learn together with their coach.

Coaching, like gardening, requires ongoing care and attention. Asking the right questions and providing the appropriate resources are nutrients for the roots of the coaching culture. Just as coaches should ask teachers reflective and supportive questions, leaders can grow the coaching culture by asking questions and dialoguing with coaches. Here are questions administrators can ask their coaches to shift instructional coaching conversations.

Questions to understand the coaching climate at your school.

- How do you build relationships with the teachers you coach?
- How can I help support those relationships?
- What are you learning about students and the school culture/needs from your instructional rounds?
- How will you measure the impact of your coaching on teacher practice? On student learning?

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- What would you like to adjust (e.g. role, schedule, focus)?
- What resources do you need to best support teachers and your coaching work?
 - o What time do you need for conversations?
 - o What time do you need for data collection?
 - o What time do you need to research and learn with the teacher to address instructional practice related to student needs?

Questions to understand the support your teachers and coaches need.

- How can I support you in your work with your instructional coach?
 - o Provide dedicated time for conversations?
 - o Create opportunities to research/learn about meaningful strategies to address student needs?

 **GIVE IT TIME TO GROW**

A culture of coaching will not grow overnight. It takes time, patience, and some experimentation. You'll plant some seeds that grow quickly into beneficial practices, other that take time to develop, and perhaps some that aren't a good fit for your soil, climate, or season.

As you experiment, keep in mind that school administrators, coaches, and teachers are all on a learning trajectory, and they all have valuable information to share with one another. A teacher may not know what type of support he or she needs but will know what his or her students need.

An instructional coach can help a teacher identify his or her instructional needs and the kinds of support needed to meet the students' needs. Coach-

teacher conversations about what practices and actions connect to what students need will also help the teacher become more cognizant of the support he or she needs.

Also, be sure to consider and then remove obstacles to the growth of your school's coaching program. Some common obstacles to establishing and sustaining a coaching culture include:

- Miscommunication about the goals and purposes of the coaching work;
- Lack of clarity about the role of the coach;
- Lack of clarity about the coaching process;
- Not seeing coaching as a priority;
- Lack of time and resources for teachers and the coach;
- Lack of support for the coach; and
- Lack of commitment from the participants.

 **MONITOR THE GROWTH**

Coaching that improves teacher practice and student learning requires progress monitoring. But remember that the coaching process is organic and not mechanical. It's not about "fixing" a teacher, and it's not a one-size-fits-all approach. Monitoring this process requires thoughtful observations and conversations with coaches and teachers about the process and its impact on student learning.

Monitor the growth of the coach through deliberate communication and reflection with the coach. You may also wish to conduct observations with and receive feedback about the coaching process from teachers.

Much of the monitoring should be about leaders reflecting on their own practices with regard to coaching. Administrators should reflect on and

seek feedback about whether they are prioritizing coaching, using coaches for their unique skill (rather than administrative tasks), and honoring the importance of coaching relationships.

DO'S AND DON'TS

To create a healthy and strongly rooted instructional coaching culture that will yield positive results for teacher, student, and school growth, it's worth keeping in mind a few additional do's and don'ts.

- Do make the instructional coaching visible to all. Don't create a culture of uncertainty about instructional coaching.
- Do align the coaching with the students' and the teachers' unique needs. Don't communicate a one-size-fits-all message.
- Do focus the conversations on

student learning. Don't focus on arbitrary teacher practices determined without regard to specific student data.

- Do capitalize on momentum. Coaches working with small groups of teachers is an important step toward creating a schoolwide coaching culture. Start with the willing teachers and support organic growth.

Most importantly, nurture a coaching culture — don't demand it. If the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have taught us anything, it is that educators are resilient, patient, and willing to maintain a growth mindset. Much as a gardener patiently waits for seeds to sprout, we must be patient and open to the possibilities and outcomes provided through coaching.

The kind of growth that moves us

forward as educators doesn't happen overnight, but rather it grows over time and with the delicate and diligent care of a coach tending to the needs of the students through the needs of the teacher like a gardener patiently caring for seedlings.

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How to prepare leaders for a crisis

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and role-plays focused on social and emotional learning, listening, and empathetic response.

We hope these recommendations will be useful for school leadership preparation programs as well as educators designing professional learning for current school leaders. Ultimately, we hope that some of these considerations will motivate and inform a revision of the NELP standards, which heavily influence content in school leadership preparation programs, to include more explicit attention to preparing school leaders to respond to both short-term and long-term crises in the future.

CRISIS CAN BE A CATALYST FOR INNOVATION

At the heart of all of the changes we have recommended is helping leaders develop a positive mindset of seeing crises as catalysts for innovation.

Crises bring along challenges, and sometimes terrible consequences, but it is important for future leaders to recognize that crises can also help explore innovations considered impossible before.

Several of the school leaders we interviewed recognized this potential. A disruption of this magnitude precluded people from relying on what they used to do and thus opened the consideration of new alternatives. Interestingly, though, while many of our interviewees expressed the desire to maintain some of the innovations tried during the pandemic, some also worried about resistance from staff and community members.

We will miss valuable opportunities for school improvement unless we help current and future school leaders see the potential of building on what was learned from this crisis to address unsolved problems in new ways.

REFERENCE

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