



COACHES CORNER

Sharron Helmke

A COACH'S TASK IS TO PLANT THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

As this issue's articles make clear, these are highly stressful times for schools. Of course, education is always a stressful profession. Even without a pandemic, educators navigate ever-evolving expectations in the form of shifting learning standards, student needs, governmental and societal expectations, and performance evaluations.

Instructional coaches play an important role as schools navigate those evolving demands. We are sometimes described as “catalysts for change” because we both inspire and support the implementation of change (Killion & Harrison, 2017). Our role is unique because we are positioned to be responsive to both leaders' and teachers' needs.

This can create tension. We are often tasked with developing positive relationships with teachers from a position as equal partners, while simultaneously advancing administrative and central office initiatives for improvement. We sometimes feel like each group of stakeholders expects us to advocate for its needs over others. Objectively speaking, the goals of teachers, administrators, and policymakers are not in conflict because they are all moving in the direction of student growth, but it may not feel that way in the day-to-day process of change.

These competing demands can leave us feeling stressed as we work to balance the urgency for improved results and the emotional needs of the teachers we support. Not only can this stress lead to feelings of overwhelm, decreased resilience, and eventual burnout, it can also lead to a very real decrease in our impact as coaches. Our own rising levels of stress can leave us less available to support the incremental growth of teachers and less patient with the process of creating sustainable change.

Too often, we may respond to this tension by making more demands of others or moving from responsive coaching into problem-solving or quick-fix solutions. But as Killion and Harrison point out, “Coaches acting as catalysts for change must be satisfied with planting seeds rather than being the director of every change effort” (2017, p.116). No seed has ever become a thriving plant because it was directed to grow faster.

Instead of trying to resolve the tension, we must recognize that it is an inherent part of change and focus on helping others negotiate it. We do that by clarifying expectations and helping teachers identify strengths and current practices that can underlie a series of manageable steps forward.

Effective coaches help teachers understand and tackle ambitious district and campus improvement goals by collaboratively working with teachers to consider questions like:

- What does this change look like in my content or grade level? In my instruction? With

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do the tasks I had planned to do. It's hard to give a Zoom workshop when you're in a hospital bed taking painkillers. Within hours, my colleagues selflessly volunteered to do my work, adding more to their plates to take everything off my plate. They told me, "Don't worry, we've got this. Just get better."

Recognizing the fundamental goodness of other people might be my most important lesson. Throughout my injury, family, friends, coworkers, and complete strangers have put down what they are doing to help me do what I need to do. This was important for me to see.

I've seen so much hatred, division,

and fear in our world that I had begun to wonder whether human compassion no longer existed. But since my crash, I have no doubt that people care deeply for each other. Caring is our default mode. That's a lesson I hope I never forget. ■

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my students?

- What aspects of this change, even small ones, are already emergent in my current teaching? What would the next step into this aspect of the work look like?
- What upcoming learning objectives or standards offer a chance to practice or lean into this work in a way that would benefit learners? Is the coach available to assist in planning this upcoming work, offer classroom support during these early efforts, or reflect on the impact of these changes?
- What are the early indicators

of success for both change in teaching practice and in student outcomes? The more immediate and accessible these indicators are, the more quickly we can either see progress or adjust our approach.

Additionally, coaches can help build teachers' resilience for change by occasionally helping them look backward to reflect on the changes that have already been mastered and become seamlessly incorporated into current practice. In doing so, we remind them that these changes, now part of current practice, were once also new, unfamiliar, and perhaps even felt a bit out of reach. Each time we step toward change, we build resilience and

confidence to tackle the next change, and the next — because we know they will keep coming. It's the nature of the work.

A coach's task is to facilitate growth, not to eliminate the need for it. Those are two very different tasks, and mistaking the nature of the work will undoubtedly lead to coaches experiencing burnout and teachers missing opportunities for improvement.

REFERENCE

Killion, J. & Harrison, C. (2017). *Taking the lead: New roles for teacher and school-based coaches* (2nd ed.). Learning Forward. ■

EQUITY IN FOCUS / Angela M. Ward

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the racial incident to think their actions were harmless.

As we reflected and planned to support all students and shift the culture moving forward, black staff members wondered aloud why I was the only person to show up to support them, noting that a contingency from central administration shows up to their campus when a staff member or student dies or commits suicide.

An additional focus of my work districtwide was to implement antiracist professional learning to all staff. I designed professional learning as an entry point to help staff build capacity to address racist issues and issues involving other social identities using actual scenarios that we were dealing with in our schools.

This process eventually led to a shift. The district has revised its crisis response plan to implement a strategic

response to issues arising from race that includes antiracist professional learning as a proactive strategy. Supporting this process was intense and highly stressful.

As an antiracist leader, I knew that self-care is critical to my ability to find meaningful connection and provide supports to my colleagues. I continue to prioritize self-care and encourage other educators to do the same as we lead in stressful times. ■