



## Fishbowl coaching magnifies the impact of feedback

BY JO LEIN

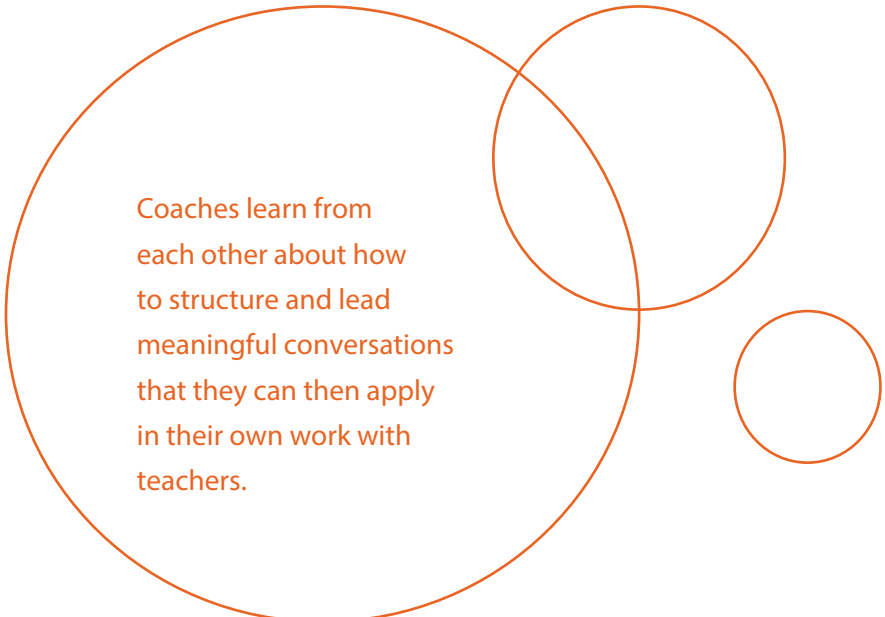
**W**hen I began working with teachers as a first-year coach, I felt like I had no idea what I was doing. To build my coaching skills, I emulated the coaches around me, but those opportunities were limited. Unsure of myself, I posed big-picture reflection questions to teachers and

was too intimidated to share my true feedback. Not surprisingly, the teachers made very little progress.

Feeling like an imposter, and desperate to find my voice and my ability to help teachers develop their skills, I spoke to my supervisor. She told me that other coaches were feeling the same way. At first, it was reassuring to know that I was not suffering alone. But

it was disappointing to think about the lack of impact our coaching team was having on teaching practices.

Since then, I have learned many concrete coaching techniques, as well as tools for helping coaches develop their own skills. One of those tools, which I learned in my second year as a coach and have made a standard part of my practice ever since, is fishbowl coaching.



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## FISHBOWL COACHING

Fishbowl coaching is where a coach and a teacher engage in a coaching session while other coaches observe the live interaction. While the conversation is happening, the other coaches take notes and prepare feedback to share after the conversation. Coaches learn from each other about how to structure and lead meaningful conversations that they can then apply in their own work with teachers.

My first fishbowl experience was nerve-racking but powerful. I felt like I was sweating through my clothes with seven sets of eyes watching my every move. I sat down with Taylor Jones, whom I had observed in the classroom a few hours earlier. I had my coaching plan gripped in my hand and I was off, sharing observations and asking reflection questions.

After I thanked Jones and she left the room, it was my turn in the hot seat. Each of the seven other coaches had an opportunity to give me feedback. One asked, “Jo, did you enable behavior with your students when you first started teaching?” “Yes. Oh, yes,” I said. She nodded and said, “You do it with adults, too. You asked Ms. Jones a tough question

and then you dialed it back. You were uncomfortable with making her uncomfortable about feedback she needed to hear.” I knew she was right, and I immediately started thinking about how I might do things differently next time.

Not only was this an important learning moment for me, but also for the other six coaches. I could tell it gave them food for thought, too. Some nodded their heads or jotted down notes.

My colleague Jamie Winston was the next coach to do a fishbowl. She sat down with James Hartford, a first-year math teacher who had no background in teaching. Hartford was struggling in his classroom, and he needed to hear some hard feedback. After Winston shared some initial praise about his strengths, she asked him, “Why did you avoid giving the consequence to Jeremy when you needed to give him one?” She stayed silent while she waited for his response. The question laid over the room like a weighted blanket. “I was scared to give it to him. I didn’t know how he was going to react,” Hartford finally said. “Let’s unpack that,” Winston replied.

The conversation continued and

it got deep, in sharp contrast to my mostly surface-level conversation with Jones. Hartford discussed his prior experience where a student had exploded at him and went on to talk about how he did not want to be “mean.” He even revealed some biased mindsets about students and their families. As a white male teaching predominately Black students, he was afraid of being accused of being racist if he held students accountable for their choices. He and Winston talked through those fears and about how holding students accountable can also demonstrate care.

After this conversation, Winston suggested that she and Hartford do a role-play to practice how to give consequences in a beneficial way. Hartford played himself and Winston played the student. Hartford was successful role-playing delivering a consequence in a supportive yet firm tone. “How did that feel?” Winston asked. “Like it’s what I have to do to show them love,” Hartford said.

Hartford left the room. The other coaches looked at each other and quietly cheered for Winston. She had taken the feedback that I had received, about not shying away from difficult

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conversations, and immediately applied it. This example shows the power of fishbowl coaching. All of the coaches practiced their coaching moves together, reflected, and learned from one another.

## DISTRICT EFFORTS TO IMPROVE COACHING

A decade after I was introduced to fishbowl coaching, I use it regularly in the nonprofit organization I founded in 2018 to bring coaching to underresourced school districts. Coaching teachers in states like Oklahoma, where I live and work, has become even more important in recent years. Currently, only one out of every four teachers in the state has a background in teaching (Lazarte-Alcala, 2021). This reality has left Oklahoma school leaders scrambling to build teacher capacity quickly to best serve students' needs. Our team partners with school districts to address that need through coaching.

To illustrate how this process works, here is an example of one school district we work with that has invested in the fishbowl approach for the last two years. This work started with some initial professional learning with all district leaders who directly influence teacher development: principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, district specialists (special education and English language development), and reading specialists. With the goal to build coaching capacity across the district, my team then rotated across schools to practice coaching using the fishbowl approach.

The days ran like this:

- All coaches reviewed the key aspects of coaching they intended to practice throughout the day: creating effective low inference notes (an objective, evidence-collecting technique during observations), selecting effective action steps, preparing a coaching script, and executing a coaching conversation. Each person made commitments for the day.

- All coaches observed one teacher for 20 minutes.
- The group reviewed all classroom-based evidence such as a classroom transcript, student work samples, and participant data. Using all of the information available, coaches selected their action steps and prepared their conversations. Depending on the skills and strengths of the group, this part of the day could have been done collaboratively or independently. Those who finished early rehearsed with one another.
- We wrapped up the day with the much-anticipated fishbowl sessions. Each coach executed their conversation in front of their peers. Then they received feedback from each person in the group using the sentence frame, "It was effective when ... next time try ... ." If time allowed, the coach role-played the conversation again, incorporating the feedback.

Coaches responded to the feedback that their colleagues received, making each conversation stronger as the day progressed. Beyond the conversations with teachers, principals worked alongside their assistant principals and instructional coaches to think broadly about school improvement using coaching. They identified specific instructional practices that they wanted to see across the school.

My team measured progress of each coach on an internally developed four-point scale rubric that included each component of the coaching conversation from praise to closing. Each leader was evaluated at the end of each of the five fishbowl days occurring every three months over two years. When the 27 coaches started the process, most leaders were scoring ones and twos on the rubric rows. Now, coaches are scoring mostly threes, with an overall average growth of 36% increase in effectiveness. This statistic is significant because that means that coaches are using empirically based coaching practices regularly (Knight, 2018; Lein, 2017).

## CHALLENGES OF FISHBOWL COACHING

Fishbowl coaching comes with some risks. District or school leaders who want to initiate fishbowl coaching to improve coaching skills should consider a number of potential challenges and how to prevent or overcome them.

### Making the teacher uncomfortable

If it was intimidating for me, who was familiar with the fishbowl method, to have seven sets of eyes on me, imagine how it might feel for the teacher. Done correctly, coaching feels like a collaboration between two adults for the best interest of students. Adding a public element to the feedback can undermine that dynamic and sometimes feel awkward, even in the context of a trusting coach-teacher relationship.

This sometimes puts teachers on the defensive, and they will sometimes address the "audience" with a lot of context and background. They may say, "Well, today was different because ..." or "This student struggles with ..." These types of reactions can sometimes get the conversation off track and lead to a confusing outcome.

Start by ensuring that the coach and teacher have a positive, trusting relationship. Then I recommend locating the coach and teacher in a separate room from the audience coaches and connecting the two rooms via video conference. Be sure the coach-teacher pair cannot see the other coaches, nor their own images. Even though the teacher will know others are watching, the conversation will hopefully feel more routine and therefore more comfortable.

### Selecting a teacher who isn't ready

Not all teachers are the best fit for fishbowl coaching. They may feel judged, challenged, or frustrated by the process. There are a number of factors to consider when selecting a teacher to participate in fishbowl coaching:

- *Trust between the teacher and coach:* Teachers need to know that the

coach is in their corner and that their feedback is in their and their students' best interests. Ideally, the coach and teacher should have an established relationship. If that's not possible (for example, if coaches come together from multiple locations and their teacher partners are not nearby), the coach and teacher should at least have a phone conversation in advance.

- *Evidence of responding to feedback:* A teacher who has previously shown evidence of implementing feedback is an ideal candidate for fishbowl coaching. In contrast, those who have demonstrated resistance to feedback will only feel added pressure in this style and may not have a productive conversation with the coach.
- *The teacher's foundational skills:* While it will be tempting to want to coach in classrooms that have the highest need, it is essential to select a teacher who has some foundational skills. Coaches often struggle to identify highest-leverage action steps in classrooms that require a lot of intervention (not to mention that it is stressful for coaches and teachers in these situations). Coaching a teacher with some foundational skills will allow the conversation to stay focused on a singular issue.

It may feel tempting to select teachers based simply on the logistics: what time they are in classrooms with students, when they have their planning time, or how it fits into the schedule of the day. Resist this temptation and get creative with class coverage to ensure the right person for this experience.

### Exposing the coach

Coaching is a complex job that requires deep analysis and interpersonal skills, cultural competence, and a deep understanding of curriculum and instruction. Fishbowl coaching may reveal to the group that the coach lacks some of these skills, and that can leave the coach feeling embarrassed or

inadequate compared to their peers. This can be particularly frustrating for new coaches who are experienced educators but are struggling with the unfamiliar role of coach.

To overcome this challenge, facilitators should get a baseline for coach skills before the fishbowl day. Facilitators can target their support during the fishbowl day and isolate a specific skill to practice. For example, one new coach I worked with needed practice identifying action steps. Before the fishbowl day, we visited four classrooms together to practice identifying all of the potential action steps and then determining the most effective action steps and those that could be considered exemplary. On the fishbowl day, when she coached a teacher in front of her peers, she was able to pull one of the exemplary action steps that she had practiced and that applied well to the current situation.

In addition, careful framing can be done to start the day. For example, a facilitator may say, "It is important that we do not compare ourselves to others. We are all going to learn something throughout today — from the smallest communication technique to huge instructional practices. The most important thing is that we are vulnerable and honest about what we do not know or do not feel comfortable with. This is why we are a team."

This challenge also highlights the importance of facilitators conducting individual follow-up with coaches after the fishbowl conversations. If the coach is feeling uncomfortable, the facilitator can discuss this with them and work diligently to ensure that they can demonstrate proficiency in other specific areas for the next round of practice.

### Breaking school or district agreements and policies

Every school context may have different policies about observations and feedback outside of the traditional evaluation periods as described by negotiated agreements between teachers unions, associations, and districts.

School leaders should examine policies closely when making decisions about the function and use of fishbowl coaching.

In certain contexts, participation in fishbowl coaching should be entirely voluntary. Administrators should properly inform the teacher who will be observing and what their role is ahead of time. While the observation can be used to establish patterns for teacher performance, the evidence should not be used as part of the teacher's formal evaluation to reduce any conflicts with district policies.

### LEVERAGE PEER LEARNING

Coaching can be isolating and confusing. Self-doubt runs rampant. And just like teaching, coaching requires a specific set of skills that take a lot of practice and feedback. Fishbowl coaching provides a way to build those skills that leverages collaborative peer learning and reaches coaches on a larger scale than one-to-one support. If fishbowl coaching is conducted in a school or a district, it also has the benefit of creating consistent knowledge and approaches across multiple coaches.

### REFERENCES

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