

Differentiated Instructional Coaching

For maximum effectiveness, tailor instruction to teachers' needs

By John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

Schools and districts have found great value in providing instructional coaching for their teachers. Instructional coaching is a unique form of professional development that provides individual assistance to teachers in refining and improving their instructional practices. It is the perfect vehicle for differentiation based on the needs of each teacher. In our book *Score to Soar: Moving Teachers From Evaluation to Professional Growth*, we have an extensive section on coaching and coaching skills. In this article, we'll outline the basics of coaching and the importance of providing differentiated coaching to meet the needs of teachers.

What Is Instructional Coaching?

Instructional coaching involves a teacher receiving support, ideas, strategies, and assistance from a coach to help them reflect on their teaching. An instructional coach can be a peer who has content area expertise, a colleague with expertise in specific teaching methods or strategies, or even a principal who desires to help teachers reflect and improve. Key elements of good instructional coaching include nurturing teacher reflectiveness and focusing that reflectiveness on the teaching and learning process.

Content Versus Teaching Strategies

In content instructional coaching, the coach helps the teacher examine their academic content to see whether what they are teaching is at the proper level for the students' understanding. Coaches also help

teachers identify ways to scaffold content and set learning priorities. Coaches who focus on teaching strategies help teachers examine their instruction to determine whether the proper techniques are being employed to maximize student learning. At times, these techniques have been identified and prioritized by the school; in other instances, the use of the techniques and strategies is determined by professional growth goals or the learning needs of the students.

An instructional coach supports teacher learning and growth no matter what the motivation or the growth needs are for that particular teacher.

Coaching Stances and the Needs of Teachers

The focus of an instructional coach's work with a particular teacher is usually guided by three sources: the teacher's professional growth plan, the school's learning and improvement goals, and feedback or direction from the principal. The focus could also include a combination of all three of these sources.

Each of these growth sources requires a differentiated approach by the instructional coach. This differentiation can include the coach's approach to the situation and assistance provided during the coaching process. We call these different approaches "coaching stances."

In their book, *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships*, Bruce Wellman, Laura Lipton, and Carrlette Humbard describe behaviors used

by mentors to meet the needs of the teachers they are mentoring. They call these differentiated behaviors "mentoring stances."

In our work with instructional coaches, we have adapted their model to coaching relationships. We kept their first two stances (*consult* and *collaborate*) but changed their third stance (*coach*) to *guide*.

- **Consult:** Coach provides needed information to coachee. This interaction model helps teachers gain information, understand its application to their goal areas, and get clarification regarding procedures and policies. This interaction model is helpful for new teachers and teachers who require specific direction or information.
- **Collaborate:** Coach works with the coachee to collectively determine a focus and solve problems. The assumption is that coach and coachee each bring a contribution to the situation in question. This stance may be used on a limited basis at first, but may take priority as the coachee becomes more confident and self-reliant.
- **Guide:** Coach asks questions to help the coachee come to conclusions and solve problems. This stance is a good way to coach veteran or exemplary teachers.

Continuum of possible coaching interactions

Consult | Collaborate | Guide

Types of Teachers

Another way instructional coaches differentiate their coaching assistance is to consider teacher types when entering a coaching relationship. In *Score to Soar*, we discuss four types of teachers based on their performance levels and the support they may need:

Exemplary/Master/Outstanding Teachers. Teachers who are doing an outstanding job benefit greatly from working with instructional coaches. Instructional coaches can help them refine their practices, add new skills, and extend useful strategies. Differentiated instructional coaching for these teachers includes opportunities for them to reflect on their work and to identify patterns and possible areas for refinement.

Instructional coaches can also help exemplary teachers to let go of old practices and try new things without fear of failure. The coach may be able to use the *guide* or the *collaborate* stance to differentiate their work with exemplary teachers.

Proficient Teachers. Proficient teachers are those who have mastered basic teaching strategies and techniques, but could benefit from learning and implementing new ideas. Instructional coaches can differentiate their support of proficient teachers by helping them see the

impact of their teaching. Coaching support might vary from reflecting on practice to sharing ideas and strategies for possible adoption.

Instructional coaches boost the confidence of proficient teachers to help them stop worrying about failure, especially as they try new strategies. Instructional coaches may be able to use the *guide* or *collaborate* stances with proficient teachers. Others will benefit from the *consult* approach.

Marginal Teachers. Marginal teachers are teachers who are having issues in one or more areas of their teaching. Instructional coaches can differentiate their support of marginal teachers by presenting instructional strategies to them and then helping the marginal teacher determine a plan for implementation. Instructional coaches can also demonstrate the implementation of the desired skills.

Marginal teachers may need the instructional strategies broken down into small, easy-to-understand parts. Coaches will most likely need to use the *consult* model in their work with marginal teachers.

Deficient Teachers. Deficient teachers are teachers who are having major difficulties in several areas. They may be candidates for improvement plans or contract termination.

In many cases, their deficiencies are beyond the scope of instructional coaching. Deficient teachers are

better helped through an intensive assistance process such as the ones we recommend in *Score to Soar*.

The Need for Follow-up and Feedback

Some teachers benefit from observation and feedback, while other teachers benefit most from conversations with their instructional coach. Instructional coaches should ask the teachers which type of feedback will be most helpful to them.

At the end of a coaching session, instructional coaches should ask the teacher they are helping:

- What did I do well in my coaching today, or what did I do today that helped you in your learning/growth?
- What do I need to change or do better on in relation to my coaching to better help you in the future?

Use this feedback to further differentiate coaching. The person you are coaching will appreciate the opportunity to provide you with feedback to guide you in your work with them. For you, the feedback will be valuable because you will learn how to differentiate or “tailor” your coaching to make sure it is beneficial to the person you are coaching.

By differentiating their work, instructional coaches help teachers experience success and improve their teaching. You will be able to personalize this important method of professional development to maximize growth opportunities for your colleagues and peers. 

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RECOMMENDED READING



Score to Soar: Moving Teachers From Evaluation to Professional Growth by John F. Eller and Sheila A. Eller

Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships by Laura Lipton, Bruce Wellman, and Carlette Humbard

