

Inspired



Instructional Coaching

Stimulate teaching by structuring meaningful observations and feedback that will improve instruction schoolwide.

By **Sandra A. Trach**

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING requires well-tuned relationships and dynamic conversations between principals and teachers that result in professional renewal. The goal is to build teacher capacity, thereby improving individual educators, instructional teams, and the entire school over time. In the process, educators work together to analyze patterns, with the coach providing meaningful feedback to help teachers sustain instructional growth.

The coaching relationship is both transformational and reciprocal, benefitting the coach and teacher alike. Instructional coaching is an authentic instructional relationship, where each partner is professionally transformed and ultimately renewed each time they engage with one another about teaching and learning. In addition—to paraphrase Douglas B. Reeves and Elle Allison in their book, *Renewal Coaching: Sustaining Change for Individuals and Organizations*

(2009)—successful organizational change requires not only new knowledge, but also changed behavior.

Coaching Basics

A principal's chief role is to improve teaching and learning and, as a result, improve student achievement. To that end, principals should conduct frequent, short classroom observations to examine individual instructional practices and calibrate teaching and learning across settings. These

observations provide frequent opportunities for teachers to evolve practice toward the expected proficiencies under the standards of the teacher evaluation system. Coaching helps teachers pull the standards apart, connect them to instructional practice, and focus on new concepts.

Frequency, specificity, and constructiveness are key to successful observations. Principals should keep their visits brief and routine, and couple them with concrete feedback linked to proficiency standards to promote a relationship of trust, support, and open communication. By doing this, principals convey a spirit of support and objectivity. Conversely, infrequent visits and sporadic feedback that is not clearly linked to the teacher evaluation system can strain the relationship between a principal and teacher.

Feedback must be specific and timely, and, whether delivered verbally or in writing, should crystalize instructional strengths and provide constructive comments for growth. Occasionally, it may include a thought-provoking, reflective question that prompts a teacher to think about students in new ways, or recalibrate the learning experience to expected proficiencies.

When principals incorporate observation and feedback into their everyday leadership practice, they promote an open dialogue with teachers that is focused on instruction and growth, which benefits both parties. The principal grows by observing individual and collective practice, helping the school strive toward being a proficient learning environment. Similarly, the teacher grows from the principal's feedback, which is tailored specifically to the lesson observed and recognizes growth over time.

Principals should keep their visits brief and routine, and couple them with concrete feedback linked to proficiency standards to promote a relationship of trust, support, and open communication.

Use Data

Data reviews help principals and teachers visualize the reality of student performance from multiple perspectives. Keep in mind that data helps generate questions, not identify answers. In order to set the stage for data analysis, principals must plan regular professional learning conversations where data is the centerpiece of the team's work. Coaching meetings, professional learning communities, and data teams are appropriate forums for reflection and introspection.

To support this work, schools should consider using norms and tuning protocols to set both the tone of the meeting and method of inquiry. Norms are behavioral agreements that are needed for an open, honest conversation that allows for collaborative learning. An effective set of norms should enable the learning conversation, not restrict it. For example, a norm could be, "remain evidence-based," or "self-monitor your speaking time."

A tuning protocol builds upon norms by encouraging team dialogue, inviting multiple perspectives, and ensuring reflective opportunities. An effective tuning protocol is highly structured, blending team direction with open-ended questions that include inquiry, feedback, and reflection. Carefully selected tuning protocols guide the conversation.

Different types of protocols support distinct types of inquiry. Principals and teachers should adapt tuning protocols based on the purpose of the meeting, time available, and number of participants. To support teachers' professional learning, principals should pair tuning protocols with the following tools:

- With research—Protocols help a team develop questions about implications for practice.

- With a text—Protocols can help a faculty expand thinking on a topic and construct new meaning around instruction.
- With professional goals—Protocols help teachers reflect on classroom data and professional practice, and then set meaningful goals within the supervision and evaluation system.
- With a student case study—Protocols help teachers gain new perspectives and feedback on how to adjust instruction.
- With a data set—Protocols help principals and staffs study successes or areas that need improvement in order to generate inquiry around effective strategies and best practices.

Both norms and tuning protocols can provide the safe, supportive structures teachers expect when using data to improve their practice. When used routinely as instructional coaching tools, they contribute significantly to building the staff's capacity for inquiry, feedback, and reflection.

Critical Feedback

Giving constructive feedback is a skilled art form, therefore, educators must hone their expertise in this area. Author and principal Catherine Glaude recommends the following basic guidelines in her book, *Protocols for Professional Learning Conversations: Cultivating the Art and Discipline* (2011):

Be specific. Keep comments concise and precise. Use simple and concrete observations to help the listener understand the description of the observation in a secure environment.

Suspend judgment. Avoid feedback that rates performance or data results. Simply describe the behavior or outcome that is observed. Allow the teacher to hear or see the feedback without experiencing additional opinions or comments.

Use a protocol. Keep the coaching conversation focused by surfacing major points in a short period of time, while also allowing the teacher time for reflection.

Feedback has a sizable .73 effect size on student learning. In his book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* (2009), John Hattie outlines three major feedback questions for both students and teachers:

1. **“Where are they going?”** What are my goals?
2. **“How are they going?”** What progress is being made toward the goals?
3. **“Where to next?”** What activities need to take place to make better progress?

By focusing instructional coaching on these three overarching points educators can delve into a rich and substantive conversation that focuses chiefly on teaching and learning, where challenges are viewed as learning opportunities and understanding is constructed in a safe environment.

Get Help

While instructional coaching has proved to be an important factor in developing teacher practice, and principals are key to instructional coaching, principals' broad spectrum of responsibilities often leave them without enough time to manage the instructional coaching process on their own. This is increasingly true given many states' new time-intensive teacher evaluation systems. Principals should leverage the support of other school leaders to lead the school through an instructional coaching process.

Assistant Principal

Principals should not overlook assistant principals as partners in the instructional coaching process. The principal and assistant principal must be synchronized in their understanding of effective instruction, including how to recognize it and provide meaningful and strategic feedback in a timely way. These efforts take time and effort on the principal's part, and must be scheduled into the week as a leadership priority. Here are some strategies

for leveraging your assistant principal.

Use common language. Develop a common lexicon that supports instructional coaching and the teacher evaluation system. This common vocabulary, in turn, becomes the common language of the school used among teachers and even students and parents.

Connect the instructional vision to visible examples in practice. Together, engage in shared walkthroughs and discuss classroom observations to recognize the essential elements of effective practice, and provide specific feedback around these in coaching experiences and teacher evaluations.

Make time for reflection and dialogue. Time for the principal and assistant principal to routinely retreat and reflect is critical in helping to synchronize instructional vision and practice. You can be open and honest with one another in a mutually supportive and safe way about what you are observing, while also inviting questions and offering feedback to each other.

Help each other refine feedback. Listening to your colleague talk through anticipated feedback for a teacher, whether coaching or evaluative, is one of the most invaluable professional learning experiences for the principal and assistant principal alike. An administrative colleague provides a much needed safety net with objective listening, constructive questioning, and meaningful feedback.

Provide mutual support and encouragement. Leading instructional change cannot happen in a silo. A principal and assistant principal must serve as a model instructional team that supports one another with the instructional intensity of daily coaching responsibilities, as well as the high volume of teacher evaluations each day.

Instructional Coaches

A principal and instructional coach partnership can help further district, school, and individual student goals, often simultaneously. Principals should maximize the use of instructional

coaches—whether they are in formal staff roles within the building, or in the district. These resident experts possess a deep understanding of the curriculum and classroom implementation needs, and can support leadership efforts around curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Together, principals and coaches work to create a balance between clear direction and support that is both evaluative and non-evaluative. To maintain this equilibrium, the roles of the principal and coach must be clear and distinct, with responsibilities differentiated for all staff. The principal is the instructional leader of the school and also an evaluator, while coaches are shared instructional leaders who support teachers but do not evaluate them. This line can never be blurred, or trust will erode, causing a breakdown in the coach/teacher and principal/teacher relationships. Principals must define and model this distinction for all staff, and consistently uphold it in a respectful and self-evident way. It is only then that staff will feel the confidence they need to engage with the coach in a consistent coaching relationship that involves the planning, risk-taking, and reflection needed for growth and proficient practice.

Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/NovDec14

➤ The **Kansas Coaching Project** website hosts research and resources on coaching, including forms, videos, and articles on best practices.

➤ Visit NAESP's **National Principals Resource Center** to find books useful for instructional coaching, such as John Hattie's *Visible Learning* series.

➤ The Teaching Channel features a video library offers educators a wide range of subjects for grades K-12, including a video that highlights **innovative coaching models**.

Data reviews help principals and teachers visualize the reality of student performance from multiple perspectives.

To best support instructional coaches, principals must plan ongoing meeting time to discuss goals and needs. The principal must consult on instructional practice, as well as on instructional leadership in equal doses. Coaches are at the forefront of change efforts, and they need the principal's guidance on how to navigate the challenges of growing professional practice. The principal must be explicit in the types of effective instructional practices he or she expects to grow in the classroom, and expect that these practices should be evident in walkthroughs and observations across the school.

A principal can support instructional coaches by bridging desired learning outcomes to the expected proficiencies on the teacher evaluation system. The principal/instructional coach relationship is a major catalyst in supporting teachers within the curriculum, instruction, and assessment cycle—across grades and settings. When principals describe instructional expectations in detail, coaches then have a clear instructional target for which to help all teachers aim, and this helps grow teacher practice accordingly.

According to Reeves and Allison in *Renewal Coaching*, strategies for an effective coaching relationship include:

- Focus on the main goal, which is established at the outset of the coaching relationship;
- Identify high-leverage actions that will have the greatest likelihood of the greatest return;
- Practice new patterns and behaviors through modeling and rehearsal;
- Explore various perspectives;
- Focus on patterns, not just a problems;

- Implement activities for learning and discovery; and
- Activate various methods of communication between the coach and teacher.

The coaching process is one of reflection, growth, and rejuvenation for the coach and teacher alike.

Growth and Renewal

Instructional coaching is a highly effective, job-embedded development strategy. It involves reciprocity of ideas, questions, strategies, and experiences that stimulates thinking and results in growth for each educator involved in the process. In turn, this growth positively impacts student learning. Effective coaching is flexible and responsive to the needs of each educator, providing teachers both the autonomy they are seeking to take risks and purpose to make meaningful and lasting changes in their practice. Instructional coaching helps teachers strategize these changes and move forward in a way that also benefits students, themselves, and the entire school.

Coaching will only thrive if teachers feel safe and supported. Principals are responsible for setting the tone and creating the conditions where instructional coaching is supported by leadership, norms, and protocols. By inspiring purpose, adopting instructional change, and sustaining energy for learning, coaching creates positive energy and professional renewal that revitalizes and benefits the school culture in a lasting way. 

Sandra A. Trach is principal of Estabrook Elementary School in Lexington, Massachusetts. **NAESP MEMBER**