Pairing novice and experienced principals provides both with opportunities to promote reflective thinking in their decision-making.

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There is a well-known proverb that goes something like this: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for life. A corollary might be: Give a principal the solution to a problem and you ensure a good day; teach a principal how to solve problems and you ensure a successful career.

Principals who are recognized as outstanding leaders are superior problem-solvers because they have developed the ability to reflect before making decisions. They have learned to recall relevant past events, to think critically about them, and to use their experience and insight to guide future actions (Peterson 1985).

One way of encouraging and supporting principals in their efforts to engage in reflective thinking is to pair novice principals with experienced principals in a peer-coaching arrangement. Given that the challenges of the principalship continue far beyond the first year or two on the job, a peer-coaching partnership provides both the novice and experienced principal an opportunity to work within a framework that supports reflection on practice,
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Principals
thinking, and foundational beliefs. Both principals can expect to benefit by:

- Establishing an intrinsically rewarding, professional relationship that helps to limit the feeling of isolation;
- Becoming aware of areas where a need for improvement may exist;
- Improving administrative skills by sharing successful practices and solutions;
- Learning to consider and address issues in a larger context by thinking “outside the box”;
- Becoming generally more reflective in evaluating all events with an eye toward future improvement.

Picking a Peer

Though paired peer-coaching arrangements for principals can be beneficial for both the novice and experienced principal, this type of relationship is not supported in many school districts for various reasons. One reason is that some districts entrust principal training to supervisors who may be overwhelmed with obligations, may not recognize the responsibility to facilitate reflective thinking, or may simply lack the needed self-reflective skills themselves.

Consequently, principals must often initiate efforts if they hope to engage in collegial learning as a means of gaining new ideas and insights from others. To establish and benefit from a peer-coaching relationship, both novice and experienced principals should consider the following steps.

**Make the first move.** Contact a principal in your district and ask him or her to participate with you in a peer-coaching arrangement. If you are a novice principal, you may want to pair yourself with a more experienced colleague.

**Schedule times for discussion.** Allot specific times for meetings with your peer principal. Provide opportunities to meet at both campuses and set aside enough time for thoughtful reflection and dialogue.

**Prepare an agenda.** Note topics in advance to guide discussions of mutual concern, interest, or relevance.

**Observe.** Use part of the visitation time to walk through classrooms at each other’s schools and discuss your observations.

**Listen.** Support each other in a non-biased manner. Maintain a non-judgmental stance in giving your partner the opportunity to bring up and reflect on past or upcoming issues.

**Create trust.** The stronger the trust relationship between paired principals, the more likely true thoughts, feelings, and beliefs will be revealed while exploring issues in depth.

**Keep a journal.** Keeping your thoughts in written form adds a private and timeless element to personal insights gained during self-reflection. Occasionally reviewing entries can also promote reflective thinking.

**Maintain peer-coaching relationships.** Because the principalship is such a complex and continually evolving re-
responsibility, it is important to maintain peer-coaching relationships over time. However, you may decide to periodically rotate peers in order to expand your collegial network. This type of networking builds a solid foundation of peer resources and experiences.

**Asking the Right Questions**

As you might imagine, the ability to formulate clear, purposeful questions that stimulate reflection and increase knowledge is an essential component of a peer-coaching relationship. In fact, you are almost obligated to your partner to formulate quality questions that prompt critical thinking. However, the task of composing reflective questions does not have to be daunting. According to Lee and Barnett (1994), simple questions such as “Tell me more” or “Can you give me an example?” will kindle reflection. Stem questions such as the following can also be used as starting points for stimulating reflective thinking:

- “How would you describe…”
- “Can you recall what occurred…”
- “What happened when you…”
- “What are you hoping to accomplish by…”
- “What kinds of outcomes did you anticipate…”
- “What reasons guided your choice of…”

Because the principalship is an extremely rewarding but equally challenging responsibility, both novice and experienced principals must decide whether to navigate these choppy waters in isolation, hoping that once in a while someone will offer up a fish, or to actively and collegially develop the skills necessary to become an expert fisherman.

**References**


**WEB RESOURCES**

Alliance for Education describes the Principal/Coach Initiative of the Seattle Public Schools, a model peer-coaching program aimed at providing support for new and aspiring principals. [www.alliance4ed.org/leadership_coaching.cfm](http://www.alliance4ed.org/leadership_coaching.cfm)

Hannel Educational Consulting offers a Peer Coaching for Principals workshop. [www.hannel.com/peer-coaching.html](http://www.hannel.com/peer-coaching.html)

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