

*“Asking the right question at the right time affords the possibility that there is another way to approach an issue”* says Isobel Stevenson (Connecticut Center for School Change) in the June 2017 issue of Learning Forward Journal, *The Learning Professional*. This should sound familiar as questioning is the currency of instructional coaching. Coaches and teachers engage in interactive discussions that very often result in more questions, fewer answers, and multiple opportunities for ongoing conversations that foster both individual and collective thinking.

While this article reflects on the efforts of the Center to collect data about coaching as a tool for principal capacity building and specifically addresses the principal and his/her coach, it offers insights into collective problem-solving and is applicable to the instructional coaching role. Yes, here is another example of a coaching relationship in schools... that of principal and coach which is quite different from principal as coach. In fact, to help understand the difference, think of a principal being mentored by his/her own coach. This is like a coach being coached by his/her mentor. The idea of helping the “coachee” come to his/her own conclusions through the questioning process is the takeaway without regard to the role of the person being coached.

*“The primary benefit of coaching is that when it is done well, it is the ultimate in individualized support for planning, action, and reflection... the goal is to provide assistance while developing the capacity of the principal to do the work of leading a school. The coach is trying to work himself (or herself) out of a job.”* Again, this is applicable to the coach-teacher relationship; that is, coaches work with their teaching colleagues to help build capacity, improve student outcomes, and increase student engagement. If we engage in a process that is designed to promote growth and learning for all, that really means growth and learning for EVERYONE.

Asking questions is a focused way to begin conversations around teaching and learning. As a coach, identifying goals is an effective way to start working with colleagues. Ask questions about what goals are important to achieve and in what order it makes the most sense to accomplish them. Let the teachers voice their thoughts, opinions, hopes, and goals. Giving your colleagues voice and choice is critical in establishing a trusting relationship. That shows your colleagues that your opinions are not as important as their own thoughts; your ego is not front and center.

Continue to ask, not tell; listen, not talk; hear, not ignore what is important to your colleagues. Know how and when to “pat and push, nag and nurture” without overstepping the boundaries of the connections you are making. Understand that there are barriers, either self-imposed or

involuntary, that might influence the reactions to working together. Remember, collaboration is not natural... teachers are accustomed to working in isolation and exposing one's supposed "flaws" does not happen automatically, easily, or without angst. After all, what is the first encounter with "support" that a teacher experiences... usually being observed and evaluated by an administrator. That's why it is crucial for coaches to begin their coaching interactions slowly, steadily, non-invasively, and always related to goal setting. Coaches visit, not observe; support, not direct; and value, not dismiss differences in opinion and ways to approach teaching and learning. Their visits are non-evaluative and deliberate.

Coaches never evaluate practice but they assess need. Just like teachers must assess his/her students' needs in a classroom, coaches must understand, acknowledge, and plan how to move practice forward. They make data driven decisions, not assumptions, about how to support colleagues and rely on these same colleagues to keep the communication cycle consistent and transparent.

Coaching is a messy and humbling experience. Be familiar with your own learning style, strengths, and areas of need in order to support colleagues. Model the "I don't know the answer" process which goes a long way towards collective problem-solving and shared responsibility. Don't try to be sorcerers or magicians or the only "holders of the truth." Instead, be the experienced colleague who wants to collaborate regularly, share new learnings, "give and get" constructive feedback, offer "side-by-side" support, and shift the paradigm of teaching and learning. Be the change agent who continues to ask the kinds of questions that get to the heart of effective instructional practice.