**“Effective Coaching through Authentic Relationships”**

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**ABSTRACT**

The new buzz word floating around the education diaspora is coaching, but what does it really mean for the educators and administrators? Though many schools are starting to incorporate some forms of coaching and/or mentoring strategies, especially for new teachers, it is important to consider the relationship between the coach and the person who is being coached. How does a positive relationship between coach and coachee (classroom teacher) being coached affect the outcomes of students?

**INTRODUCTION**

The common trend in recent years in most academic school settings has been the hiring of instructional coaches. These coaches have been brought in to provide assistance to teachers’ professional development growth. However, despite good intentions, many schools and teachers are sometimes unclear on the purpose these instructional coaches serve. Joyce and Showers (1981) described the purpose of coaching as “a collegial approach characterized by an observation and feedback...for the purpose of integrating mastered skills and strategies into a curriculum, a set of instructional goals, a time span, and a personal teaching style” (p. 170). Having a clear purpose helps to foster a positive relationship between the coach and coachee.

**COACH AND COACHEE DEFINED**

In addition to defining the purpose of instructional coaching, schools and teachers must understand the differences between having a coach and having a mentor. The blurred lines can lead to ineffectiveness in a teacher’s professional growth. Instructional coaches are “professional educators who typically work with other classroom teachers to help them improve their practice” (Stock & Duncan, 2010, p. 59); whereas, mentoring “is the process of providing help, advice, and guidance to people with less experience for the purpose of helping them with their personal and career development” (Stock & Duncan, 2010, p. 59). One major difference between a mentor/mentee and a coach/coachee is the end goal: in a coach/coachee relationship, the end goal is creating a classroom that is student centered, that is, the coach provides best instructional practices to the teachers to help improve students’ academic success; whereas, the end goal for a mentor/mentee relationship is more teacher centered, that is, the teacher is showing personal and professional growth instead of the student.

Another major difference between with coaching and mentoring is confusion about teaching beliefs. In a mentor/mentee relationship, a difference in teaching beliefs can strain the relationship and prevent the teacher from growing. Bradbury and Kaballa (2008) also listed communication as a barrier because the mentor/mentee might not have the proper tools available to share and discuss conflicting beliefs about teaching. On the other hand, while conflicting teaching beliefs might be present in a coach/coachee relationship, having similar end goal – students’ academic success – helps the line of communication to be on track.

Collet (2012) highlighted one of the glaring differences between coaching and mentoring:

“Coaching provides contextualized professional development, creating opportunities for construction of beliefs and practices to be grounded in teaching experiences. Instructional improvements can occur as teachers practice, observe results, and evaluate effects on student outcomes. Coaches can support this process and encourage its ongoing use.” (p. 272)

**DUAL ROLE CONUNDRUM: INSTRUCTIONAL COACH AND ADMINISTRATION**

Coaching is most effective when the coach and coachee are in a working relationship with goals being determined by both the coach and the coachee. It is easy to understand why a teacher may not be cooperative when being asked to participate in an instructional coaching program. Teachers (coachee) may be anxious during the coach led evaluations, supervision and evaluation, especially if the coach is an administrator who could determine if they will be employed for the following academic year. Tensions do arise when the coach has a dual role as an administrator and instructional coach. “Tension is noted between the desired collaborative, trusting relationship and conflicting functions when the supervisor is also an administrator (with responsibilities such as summative evaluation, resource allocation, and employment decisions).” (Mett, 2017) These tensions can easily be settled by creating a safe and trusting coach and coachee relationship.

The power relationship of a coach that has a dual administration/supervisory should not be ignored. It should be keen for the coach, particularly in an administrative role as well, to keep or improve a connection with the coachee. To keep or improve relationships between coach and coachee “Instructional leaders and coaches have to be able to acknowledge there is not a one-size-fit-all approach to teacher supervision and evaluation” (Mett, 2017). Coaches also expect effective and useful formative feedback that is tailored to the needs of the coachee. Much like how teachers are expected to differentiate instruction for students, successful instructional coaching programs have differentiated coaching styles and strategies to best help the coachee inside the classroom.

“By understanding the individualized needs of teachers, developing a sense of trust to continually improve instruction as a collective faculty, and addressing agreed upon areas of improvement efforts, these principals were able to ensure all teachers received targeted improvement effects through differentiated supervision that guided improvements efforts regardless of the level of teacher expertise in the name of increasing student achievement.” (Mett, 2017)

**COACHING AND IMPROVED STUDENT OUTCOMES**

The cornerstone of an effective relationship between a coach and coachee is trust. Having trust allows for the coach and coachee to have meaningful conversations about students’ academic successes and failures. Having trust allows a teacher to have an open mind when the coach suggests new strategies to use if old ones are not showing the desire results. If there is no trust, having difficult conversations about student learning provides a disservice to students and coachee. Before any coaching can begin, the coach and coachee must establish trust from the first meeting.

According to Walkowiak (2016), “trust is necessary because opening classrooms to the instructional coach may be intimidating for some teachers. Typically, any intimidating feelings are washed away when relationships are built first” (p. 15). One way to establish trust from the onset is for the coach to be open about his/her role, purpose for working with the teacher, expectations for him/herself and teacher, and maintain confidentiality. Setting these expectations can assuage teachers’ hesitations to let their guard down and begin to establish a trusting relationship with the coach. Walkowiak (2016) further revealed that

“The coach should focus on getting to know teachers on a professional and personal level. Sharing his/her own past challenges as a classroom teacher is one way to begin; this openness demonstrates empathy for the teacher’s own job-related stress. Building trust helps ensure that relationships are healthy, making the environment safe for taking risks. (p.15)

Establishing trust is vital because the teacher is allowing another person into his/her classroom with the goal of changing routines and practices that may have been in place from the beginning of the teacher’s career. One of the purpose of coaching is to illicit change in the teacher’s instructional practice and for change to occur, trust must be established between the coach and coachee.

Walkowiak (2016) provided the following when discussing the difficult conversations between coaches and coachees:

“If teachers know to expect that their conversations with coaches will be focused on evidence of student learning, there will likely be improved communication and more fruitful dialogue. Of equal or perhaps greater importance, conversations should be a mutual dialogue so the instructional coach and teacher(s) learn together from the discussions. When talking about evidence, the coach should let the teachers know that there is not typically a correct or clear answer and that it is a collaborative conversation. By asking teachers about their ideas, coaches show that they value what teachers have noticed in student dialogue or written work. However, the coach should also share ideas about specific.” (p. 16)

Establishing trust allows the coach to begin having meaningful conversations with the coachee about student learning. As mentioned earlier, making changes to one’s instructional routines can be a scary endeavor for some teachers; however, if the ultimate goal is to provide evidence of students learning beyond the benchmark and end of year testing, teachers must learn to have those difficult conversations with their coaches.

**COACHING AND INCREASED TEACHER RETENTION**

A number of studies have found that as many as 50% of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years of entering the occupation, often resulting in teacher shortages across various parts of the country (Ingersoll & Perda, 2014). Teachers are expected to “present a full repertoire of instructional strategies, they must support teachers’ epistemological understanding and flexible and opportunistic use of such strategies, enabling teachers to populate them with their own intentions” (Collet, 2014, p. 6). To assist teachers with their workload, instructional leaders have to provide them with several strategies to meet these demands. Without these strategies, many teachers can leave the field within their first year.

In addition to having trust and communication, instructional coaches must provide teachers with authentic teaching support and practices that will allow for professional and student growth. One model Collet (2014) suggested was the Gradual Increase of Responsibility where coaches “make recommendations, ask probing questions, affirm teachers' appropriate decisions, and praise in order to provide decreasing scaffolding that moves teachers toward skillful use of effective instructional practices” (p. 7). In this model, teachers move through six phases of independence:

1. Modeling: coaches model instructional practices for teacher to use in the classroom.
2. Recommending: coaches offer suggestions that can improve instruction in the classroom.
3. Asking questions: coaches as high-level thinking questions that can possibly lead to meaningful conversations and growth.
4. Affirming: after receiving support, teachers begin implementing changes in the classroom and look to the coach for affirmation they are doing the right actions.
5. Praising: when teachers receive specific and authentic praise, they become more confident in their abilities and seek out other areas for continued growth.
6. Interdependence and Collaboration: teachers become more confident and begin to rely less on their coaches.

(Collet, 2014, p. 10-13)

The Gradual Increase of Responsibility is one model that can provide teachers with scaffolding assistance so they can gain more confidence in their teaching abilities. Not having support, especially in the first years of teaching, can cause many teachers to leave the profession. Schools and teacher preparation programs must provide these gradual releases of support to teachers, especially novice teachers, if they are to remain in the profession.

**CONCLUSION**

Coaching can be an effective method in improving student success outcomes and teacher retainment. Though coaching does come with its own set of issues. Coaches who are also administrators should always check their power over their coachees and create a safe and trusting environment, while coachees should learn to be more welcoming of advice and help inside of their own classroom.

**PRESENTATION:**

Coaching has been an invaluable resource when it came to my first year teaching at Al Falah Academy during the 2016-2017 academic year and has only improved my teaching ability during the current academic year. I accredit the success of my coaching experience to the administration allowing Dr. Bruce and I time to develop a working relationship that was built on trust and mutual respect. I also accredit Dr. Bruce for balancing her administration role with her coaching role in a way to support teachers. Her transition from classroom teacher to administrator was a positive change for our school environment, for not only was she able to advocate to teachers when changes were made, she advocated for teachers when changed needed to be implemented. I have been able to use Dr. Bruce as a resource, but she has always asked for my input when implanting new techniques or classroom resources, which has led to better student outcomes. We want to use our time at ISNA Education Forum to advocate for implantation of coaching programs within other Islamic School and educational programs. As the Prophet Muhammad stated "Acquire knowledge and impart it to the people." - Al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 107

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