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How Administrators Support Peer Coaching

"She has nineteen years' teaching experience. I have six. Who am I to make suggestions?"

Just as athletic coaches instruct, train, and tutor players, teachers in peer coaching situations instruct, train, and tutor one another. Administrators can focus this collegial interaction on teachers' individual professional development, on improving school culture, and, ultimately, on enhancing school effectiveness. The first task is to select an appropriate coaching model—I will discuss technical, collegial, and challenge coaching here—and then to actively support the coaching process.

Photographs by Anne Vladikhan, courtesy of Consolidated High School District 230, Palos Hills, Ill.

Technical Coaching

Technical coaching helps teachers transfer training to classroom practice, while deepening collegiality, increasing professional dialogue, and giving teachers a shared vocabulary to talk about their craft. The approach assumes that objective feedback given in a nonthreatening and supportive climate can improve teaching performance. Technical coaching generally follows staff development workshops in specific teaching methods; the model pairs consultants with teachers or teachers with one another.

The technical coaching model grows out of the work of Joyce and Showers (1983). Teachers given technical coaching generally will (1) practice new strategies more frequently and develop greater skill, (2) use the new strategies more appropriately, (3) retain knowledge about and skill with the new strategies for longer periods of time, (4) teach the new

Coaching can enhance professional development and school culture when administrators select a model appropriate to school goals and take steps to show that they value and support it.

strategies to their students, and (5) understand their purposes and uses more clearly (Showers 1985).

The positive effects of technical coaching are not without their price, however. With only a moderately difficult teaching strategy, teachers may require from 20 to 30 hours of instruction in its theory, 15 to 20 demonstrations using it with different students and subjects, and an additional 10 to 15 coaching sessions to attain higher-level skills (Shalaway 1985). These hours add up in costs for consultant time and released time.

There are also less tangible costs to consider. Teachers in one district, which uses both technical *and* collegial models, report that certain technical coaching practices tend to inhibit collegiality and professional dialogue. For example, teachers frequently use clinical assessment forms to record the presence or absence of specific behaviors and the degree of thoroughness with which they are performed (Showers 1985). To the question, "Did the teacher state the purpose of the game?" the observer-coach of a concept attainment lesson might circle the term (*thoroughly, partially, missing, not needed*) that best describes the teacher's behavior. To complete the assessment form the observer must evaluate the adequacy of a teacher's decisions.

Because technical coaching gives the observer an evaluative function, there is a tendency for teachers to give each other "advice" or "constructive criticism." The requirement to evaluate also tends to intimidate novices who are working with veteran teachers. "Who am I to tell her what to do?"

or "It was awkward observing my department head" are typical comments. Some teachers find that the technical model puts them on the defensive. For a very few teachers it recalls old wounds, and they may take out their hurts on their colleagues. In contrast, suspension of judgment in collegial coaching helps teachers to establish open professional interchange more quickly.

Collegial Coaching

The major goals of collegial coaching are to refine teaching practices, deepen collegiality, increase professional dialogue, and to help teachers to think more deeply about their work. The model assumes that teachers acquire and deepen career-long habits of self-initiated reflection about their teaching when they have opportunities to develop and practice these skills. The long-range goal is self-coaching for continuous, self-perpetuating improvements in teaching.

Collegial coaching, most often conducted by pairs of teachers, concentrates on areas the observed teacher wishes to learn more about. The observed teacher's priority, rather than an instructional method presented in an inservice workshop, determines the coaching focus. The peer coach routinely gathers classroom data about the teacher's priority (giving directions, for example), evidence of student learning, and the teacher's instructional decisions and behavior. The coach helps the observed teacher analyze and interpret it, and encourages the teacher to make applications to future teaching. For example, in the concept attainment lesson cited earlier, the technical coach made judgments about the teacher's performance. The collegial coach, in contrast, helps the teacher analyze and judge how his or her decisions affect student learning.

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Cognitive coaching, strategies designed to enhance teachers' perceptions, thinking, and instructional decisions, is one example of this approach. In cognitive coaching, teaching is viewed as a highly professional activity requiring a repertoire of specialized techniques and the exercise of judgment about when teachers should apply them. Coaches are trained to facilitate the thinking processes that underlie those judgments. This model, developed for use by administrators coaching (not evaluating) teachers, has been adopted by teachers

interested in peer coaching (Costa and Garmston 1985).

Although all coaching positively affects teachers' self-concept, work environment, and professional commitment, collegial and challenge coaching probably do this better than technical models. Most teachers lack opportunities for professional dialogue and are incredibly isolated from one another. DeSanctis and Blumberg (1979), for example, found that teachers in one New York high school engaged in only two minutes' talk about their work each day. Simply increasing the work-related communication between peers enhances teachers' professional self-concept.

Collegial coaching is a good choice for administrators wishing to affect school culture. Collegial coaching creates open professional dialogue, and helps teachers feel "efficacious," a quality the Rand Corporation found in the mid-70s to be the variable most significantly related to successful schools. Challenge coaching often grows from environments in which these dynamics are present. When teachers' professional dialogue increases, the school system itself becomes capable of change. According to Saphier and King (1985), school culture is the product of 12 school norms interacting with the central values of the school. Of these 12, at least 5 can be influenced by coaching: collegiality, experimentation, tangible support, reaching out to the knowledge bases about teaching, and honest, open communication. Saphier and King argue that if these norms are strong, instruction will be significant, continuous, and widespread. But if these norms are weak, improvements will be infrequent, random, and slow. If collegial coaching strengthens these norms, what are the costs?

Training is the largest single cost for schools using collegial coaching. An effective training-for-coaching program trains teachers before they coach and provides follow-up training while the coaching program is under way. A training program should help teachers refine coaching skills and identify practices that impede movement toward collegiality.

Collegial coaching also has certain personal costs. When the goals are long-range, such as improving school culture, administrators pay in patience. A new superintendent in a small district learned that his teachers hardly knew one another professionally, so he introduced a collegial coaching program. He knew from previous experience that he would see major changes in the school culture within three years. While he waits, he will continually monitor practices that support his goals for the district.

Challenge Coaching

Challenge coaching helps teams of teachers resolve persistent problems in instructional design or delivery. The term *challenge* refers to resolving a problematic state. The model assumes that team problem-solving efforts by those responsible for carrying out instruction can produce insightful, practical improvements. Since trust, collegiality, and norms supporting problem solving in professional dialogue are prerequisite conditions, challenge coaching often evolves from other coaching approaches. Challenge coaching differs from technical and collegial models in two ways: in its process and in its products.

Challenge *processes* start with the identification of a persistent problem or with a desired goal. Challenge coaching is done in small groups; technical and collegial coaching are most often done in pairs. Unlike technical and collegial practices, nonteachers like aides, librarians, or administrators are sometimes included in challenge teams for their special perceptions, expertise, or potential role in a solution.

Third-grade teachers, for example, are concerned about the enormous amount of instructional time devoted to teaching regrouping in subtraction algorithms. Is it possible to cut instructional time, perhaps even in half? Two third-grade teachers, a second-grade teacher, a classroom aide, and a math specialist plan a way to introduce, teach, and monitor the effects of teaching "additive subtraction," a fresh approach in which traditional concepts in regrouping need not be taught. They meet to conceptualize, plan an approach, and construct some lessons. One members of the group teaches the lessons

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while several others collect data for later evaluation. If the new procedures are successful, the teachers will adopt the team's *product* as a new way to teach subtraction.

In another example, teachers in a science department meet about a typically difficult concept for students. Later, each will teach, observe another's work, and monitor student reaction to the common lesson. As they incorporate new ways to aid student understanding, they will have redesigned the lesson.

In yet another example, high school teachers want to increase the cognitive difficulty of student assignments without the accompanying negative effects of increases in student anxiety: negotiation for grading leniency, requests for procedures to reduce cognitive complexity, and blocked thinking. Five teachers from different disciplines join in an educational version of the "skunk works" (product development) processes reported by Peters and Waterman in *In Search of Excellence*. They describe what students would be doing differently in each of their classes if they reached the desired goal. They identify the internal resources (knowledge, skill, attitude) students would need. They brainstorm instructional approaches. Each commits to a personal plan. They implement, meet, share, revise, and implement again. Their products, which may be adopted by other teachers, are new teaching procedures across the disciplines in which students routinely engage in more higher-order thinking than before.

Whether coaching follows a technical, collegial, or challenge model, it brings a fresh and important strategy to staff development. Bruce Joyce, Judith Warren Little, Tom Bird, Beverly Showers, and others have stressed the idea that people master new skills best when they are placed in coaching situations (McREL 1985). Thus, from the perspectives of both teaching mastery and school culture, coaching helps make schools more effective. To ensure that the positive effects of coaching develop and endure, administrators need a support strategy.

Administrative Support for Peer Coaching

Administrators develop and maintain peer coaching in their schools in five ways. The most critical action is (1) selecting a coaching model most likely to produce the outcomes the school deems important. Thereafter, administrators support peer coaching by (2) demonstrating that they value it, (3) providing a focus for coaching activity, (4) providing training for coaches, and (5) modeling positive coaching behaviors.

1. *Selecting a coaching model.* Figure 1 illustrates the major distinctions between coaching models. To choose between technical and collegial coaching, administrators must identify the outcomes they want to achieve and the resources they are willing to commit.

Technical coaching is most effective for transferring teacher training to classroom application, but it requires a high number of costly classroom observations.

Collegial coaching is most effective for promoting self-initiating, autonomous teacher thought and improving school culture, but training coaches is the major cost of this approach.

Challenge coaching is most effective to solve instructional problems but usually requires prior experience with one of the other models. Additionally, challenge coaching is usually done by a subset of the staff with high interpersonal and problem-solving skills, and not with an entire faculty. Often principals involve their staffs in selecting the most appropriate coaching model.

2. *Demonstrating value.* Administrators demonstrate that they value peer coaching by (a) providing resources, (b) structuring coaching teams, (c) acknowledging coaching practices, and (d) devoting staff meetings to coaching topics.

Resources. One high school in an Illinois district regularly provides substitutes for teachers who want to observe a colleague. Teachers feel recognized and acknowledged as professionals by the board and administrators. Morale is strong. Teachers moved from uncertainty and some isolated cynicism two years ago to enthusiastic support for the program.

Other school leaders provide different resources. An Alaska district gives each school a substantial peer-coaching budget. A California district places a

rotating substitute specializing in thinking skills in classrooms to release teacher-coaches. Another district gives teachers faculty meeting time to practice peer coaching skills and helps teachers work out self-releasing patterns. For example, one teacher could take his and a colleague's class to physical education (or to the library, or to view a film), while the released teachers peer coach. The teachers would then hold a conference at lunch or after school. Sometimes a department head or specialist teacher takes a class so teachers can observe one another.

One junior high gives personal preparation credits to teachers who spend a certain amount of time peer coaching. Later in the year, teachers can exchange the credits for a personal leave day.

Structure. By structuring coaching teams across departments or grade levels, administrators make faculty members more aware of their common resources and problems. This is an effective strategy for improving schoolwide understanding and culture, particularly in systems where some programs appear to be less highly valued than others.

In one system, for example, an industrial arts teacher observed that other teachers tended to denigrate his department. "None of our kids get academic honors; none of our kids go to Ivy League schools; none of our kids get their name in the school newspaper." Prior to the coaching program, teachers assumed that the industrial arts program was not as valuable as academic programs. A coaching team composed of an industrial arts teacher, an English teacher, a home economics teacher, and a counselor caused teacher attitudes toward the industrial arts program, and teacher, to change.

Although teachers usually prefer to structure their own coaching teams, some administrators make the assignments. Since teachers will interpret administrator values through the way in which peer coaching teams are formed, principals should explain their approach to teachers.

Acknowledgement. Administrators also show that they value teachers' coaching work in personal ways: asking a teacher to explain the program to visitors, sending a personal note, or discussing teachers' roles in a school newsletter.

Meetings. Some principals invite teachers to share coaching ideas in faculty meetings. Still others allow teachers to use time that would otherwise be devoted to all-school meetings to discuss coaching. Such scheduling adaptations illustrate that what a staff talks about in meetings (not

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what is on agendas) is the best indicator of what is valued in the school.

3. *Providing a focus.* Administrators support peer coaching programs by giving teachers a structure for gathering data and providing feedback, by targeting a particular instructional content, and by ensuring frequency of coaching. Providing a coaching focus is essential to program success.

Providing a structure helps the teacher being observed control the observation; thus, it eliminates the anxiety teachers feel about having a colleague judge their work. For example, if you come into my classroom, I should have the right to say, "I want you to look at my wait time, or the ratio and sequence of higher- and lower-level questions that I use with students, or my proximity with kids. Additionally, here are some ways that you might gather this data for me."

It is especially helpful for beginning coaches to structure a narrow observational focus for gathering and reporting data. Although technical coaching models often use clinical assessment forms to maintain a specific focus, teachers using collegial and challenge models select their own focus, agreeing between themselves what data collection techniques will be most useful and comfortable for the host teacher. In challenge coaching teachers use the problem they are working on as the observation focus.

After the data are collected, the information may be communicated to the observed teacher through one of three feedback styles: mediative, technical, and evaluative.

The coach providing *mediative feedback* gives descriptive reports and asks nonjudgmental questions that cause the teacher to analyze and evaluate instructional decisions. In addition, the coach has the teacher propose alternative teaching behaviors. The technique is that of the athletic coach who asks the player to analyze plays on video playbacks and then to set personal goals. In the same way, the coach helps the teacher analyze teaching strategies after the lesson is over, and then to set goals that will improve personal performance for the next lesson. In giving *technical feedback* the coach tells the teacher which of the planned teaching behaviors were or were not used in the lesson. Frequently, when teachers first apply a new teaching skill, they have difficulty in monitoring their own behavior and observing student reactions at the same time. In fact, the normal stress associated with being observed may preclude easy recall of what did or did not happen in a lesson. A coach who can observe and give specific feedback regarding the presence or omission of teaching strategies can be very useful. In practice, however, technical coaches rarely give teachers *only* data; some evaluation seems to creep into most technical coaching.

Evaluative feedback can and should be avoided in technical coaching. Teachers can make the distinction between evaluative feedback and giving descriptive data about a lesson. It's the difference between saying, "Your class was out of control," and describing a situation about which a teacher can make cause-and-effect inferences: "When you turned your back to write the examples on the board, students began to talk."

Content can also focus coaching. Some staffs set schoolwide, grade, or department-level goals to improve certain teaching skills. For example, teachers might work on skills of responding nonjudgmentally, getting students to offer and test theories, and causing students to reflect about their own thinking processes. A teaching strategy—cooperative learning, writing across the curriculum, synectics—also can provide a content focus for coaching.

Finally, an administrator focuses the coaching process by establishing expectations for frequency. In coaching, more is better. In fact, Joyce and Showers (1982) offer the opinion that a "best pattern" is teacher-pairs collaboratively

"In coaching, more is better."

coaching one another each week. Over the long term, they indicate that 10 to 15 coached practice sessions are desirable for teachers to reach a high level of skill in learning a moderately complex teaching activity. No simple formulas exist, however, for the number of collegial coaching sessions required to change teacher norms about professional discourse, or the number of challenge coaching sessions needed to change attitudes about team collaborative problem solving.

Whatever the focus mechanism, the key to teacher satisfaction and learning and to program success is teacher ownership of the process. If an administrator unilaterally were to determine a focus, the likelihood of teacher ownership would be slight. When teachers help to choose a focus, however, their commitment to program success increases accordingly (Berman and McLaughlin 1975, Garmston 1985, and Lieberman and Miller 1981).

Provide Training in Coaching

Training in coaching is essential and is a fourth critical way administrators support peer coaching. A little training is not enough.

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	Technical Coaching	Collegial Coaching	Challenge Coaching
Major Goals	• Accomplish transfer of training • Establish common vocabulary • Increase collegiality and professional dialogue	• Refine teaching practices • Stimulate self-initiating, autonomous teacher thought • Improve school culture • Increase collegiality and professional dialogue	• Develop solutions to persistent instructional problems • Conduct action research • Promote instructional improvements to other teachers
Observer Practices	• Checks presence, absence, degree of teaching behaviors • Makes value judgments • Establishes several observations, postconference cycles on the same topic	• Clarifies in a preconference learning objectives, teaching strategies, and observer role • Helps teachers recall, analyze, and evaluate teaching decisions • Enables teacher to make value judgments • Enables teacher to select preconference, observation, postconference topics	• Envisions a desired state or defines a problem (challenge) • Plans action research • Develops, conducts, and tests solution approaches • Evaluates and recommends adoption for self or others
Skills	• Observation and data collection of specific teaching methodology • Feedback, reinforcement, conferencing skills	• Observation and data collection of success indicators, teacher behaviors, and special area about which teacher requests data • Facilitating, in-depth conferencing	• Interpersonal communications, problem solving, and planning • Observation, data collection, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis
Major Premise	• Teachers will improve teaching performance provided objective data is given in a nonthreatening and supportive climate	• Teachers will acquire career-long habits of self-initiated reflection and improvement provided opportunity to develop skills in doing so.	• Problem-solving efforts by those responsible for carrying out instruction can produce insightful, practical improvements in instructional design and delivery
Special Resources	• Training in teaching methodologies	• Training in coaching • Models from administrators, department chairs, faculty meetings	• Norms of collegiality and professional dialogue • Release time for planning and group observations • Access to literature or specialists

Fig. 1. Major Distinctions Between Technical, Collegial, and Challenge Coaching

"A teaching strategy —cooperative learning, writing across the curriculum, synectics—also can provide a content focus for coaching."

Good training uses the best available information about adult learning; provides teachers with theory, information, and demonstrations; addresses teachers' concerns about giving and receiving feedback; and helps teachers develop and refine specific coaching skills. Follow-up workshops can help teachers refine and monitor coaching practices and solve problems that tend to come up. During each actual coaching session, coaching teams also evaluate their own processes.

Good training also provides rich practice in a specific coaching model. In cognitive coaching, for example, coaches are taught to ask cause-effect questions, respond nonjudgmentally, and offer ideas in ways that leave the observed teacher in control of the situation.

Model Desirable Behaviors

Teachers watch the walk more than they listen to the talk. Administrators who model their willingness to be observed and to receive feedback communicate two powerful messages to teachers: they value the coaching process, and they are willing to risk their own vulnerability as they learn.

Principals often model their openness to feedback by routinely asking staff to evaluate faculty meetings: What did teachers like about the meeting? What do teachers wish there had been more or less of, or done differently? Some principals use surveys to learn how teachers perceive their performance; then they report the responses at faculty meetings and communicate their plans for self-improvement.

Administrators also model by their willingness to coach and be coached by shadowing another principal. In the shadowing program developed at Far West Labs, for example, one principal follows a colleague throughout a portion of the day, takes field notes, and then interviews the principal about decisions, activities, and behaviors. The observed principal discusses how his or her daily actions relate to professed goals and priorities for the school.

It is essential, however, that principals and assistant principals continue to distinguish between their work with teachers as coaches and their work as evaluators (Costa and Garmston 1986). They can effectively perform both functions if three conditions are met: (1) teachers know when principals are supervising them and when they are evaluating them, (2) the principals' behaviors are congruent with the function they are performing, and (3) trust exists in the relationship.

Administrators want teachers to respond to feedback about their teaching, to strive for self-awareness, to monitor and evaluate their decisions, and to improve themselves professionally. By modeling these behaviors themselves, administrators take a giant step toward supporting teacher attainment of these goals.□

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