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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD, Michael Maffoni & Susan Sparks

Sails and Anchors

Realign Coaching Roles and Resources to Promote Collaboration

“One outgrowth of the process of rethinking and revising coaching plans is that coaches and principals in many schools have realigned a coaches’ work with efforts to build their school’s collective capacity to improve.” -Les Foltos, 2015

Collaboration is essential and the lifeblood of any school. Leaders know this, teachers want this, and students deserve our best efforts to create collaborative cultures. When coaching is focused on supporting collaborative teams, it strengthens a school’s efforts to become more collaborative. On the other hand, when coaching is targeted towards assisting individual teachers, it can have the opposite effect and may actually undermine a school’s efforts to develop a collaborative culture.

Susie Kirvin, an instructional coach in Jefferson County, Colorado, noticed this possibility and said, “I believe my coaching of individual teachers is having a positive impact on instructional practice, however, I can’t help but wonder if this individualized approach is actually creating gaps in common learning and practice within our school.” She

continued, “The more I learn about the impact collaborative teams can have on student learning, the more I truly believe I need to shift my focus to helping teams collectively improve their practice.”

We concur and suggest that in a school setting, there simply isn’t enough time, energy or resources to support the practice of coaching teachers in isolation. Schools can however, take advantage of the positive effects generated by traditional coaching models if they are willing to realign the role of coaches from one of supporting individual teachers to one of providing collaborative teams with what they need to succeed.

“Coaching is part of the DNA that supports this [collaborative] culture and is a powerful tool that drives systemic improvement across the school. -Les Foltos, 2015

Building a collaborative culture requires teachers learn together; it’s one of the first steps schools take toward becoming a Professional Learning Community. Rather than coaching individual teachers on a range of discrete and sometimes isolated instructional practices, we believe coaches should focus on developing a team’s capacity to build shared knowledge around best practice.

As teacher teams are coached around a common set of instructional strategies they themselves identified, teachers



benefit from the simultaneous support of the coach **and** their colleagues. The focus of the team is on learning from and with their coach and changes in professional practice reflect a combination of the best thinking of both the coach and other team members.

Team meetings become the place where teachers make meaning of their practice, build common language, discuss how to implement new strategies, and assess what effect the new strategy had on learning. This is also where teachers enhance their individual and collective sense of efficacy. As Foltos says, teachers who “don’t know, but want to know” have an opportunity to hear the same message at the same time and clarifying questions can be asked and answered. Coaching teams in this way builds tremendous ownership and wisdom around best practice.

Coaching teams also promotes the kind of action orientation that leads to innovation. Michelle Davis, an instructional literacy coach from Augustine, Florida, noticed, “We had a lot of teachers who had a lot of strengths that were not necessarily being tapped.” But Davis saw this change when teachers began collaborating. “Now,” she says, “teacher strengths are being shared. Teachers who never thought of doing something new are trying it because they see something being successful in someone else’s classroom.”

Finally, coaching teams contribute to a sense of community, create a culture of inquiry, and promote the development of higher levels of relational trust between and among team members. Trust is cultivated when learning is transparent. It’s more likely there will be more meaningful conversation more of the time during team meetings than in one-on-one coaching sessions.

All of these outcomes would be virtually impossible if each member of the team was being coached independently on a different instructional strategy; one they may have chosen themselves based on their own personal interests or needs. Remember, collaboration is defined as a systematic process in which teachers work interdependently to analyze and impact professional practice to improve individual and collective results. There can be no interdependency when individual teachers are coached independently on a variety of different instructional strategies.

What is needed to ensure the development of a collaborative culture are, “frequent and consistent opportunities for teachers to work together in a structured way to research topics, collaborate, share knowledge, plan lessons, and reflect on their

own practice.” (Wren and Vallejo, 2009). Promoting this kind of collective effort around the learning of new skills and strategies is an essential element of effective collaboration.

“The instructional coaching model has tremendous potential, both good and bad. Instructional coaches can be the wind in the sails of a struggling school or they can be an anchor.” -Wren and Vallejo, 2009.

Coaches play a critical role in creating the kind of collaborative culture that builds the collective capacity necessary to improve teaching and learning. Whether we become sails or anchors for our schools will depend on whether or not we choose to realign our coaching roles and resources in ways that promote collaboration. ■

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Michael Maffoni, has more than 30 years of public school experience. He brings a unique lens to the development of systems and structures to support schools, collaborative teams, and individual educators to enhance effectiveness and student growth.

Susan Sparks is an educational consultant who helps teams and districts develop more successful schools through facilitation, training and coaching.

Resources

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