

Time for a Coaching Tune-Up!
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Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance.
Atul Gawande, 2011, p. 23

Earlier this year as winter gave way to spring, my sons and I pulled our bikes out of the garage and gave them a tune-up in preparation for a mountain biking trip. My oldest son, who had a lot of other things going on, got into a bit of a hurry and did not give his bike a thorough tune-up. He has the nicest bike in the family and may have assumed that all was well. A few days later we were two miles into a seven-mile loop when his pedal started wobbling. We pulled out the tools and realized that we didn't have an Allen wrench large enough to tighten his pedal. As a result, he had to stop every half mile to tighten his pedal with some make-shift tools. Eventually his pedal just fell off and he walked out the last two miles in frustration. What should have been a beautiful and pleasant experience became maddening—all from the lack of a proper tune-up.

Bikes, cars, boats, snowmobiles, furnaces, gardens, homes, relationships. You name it. Without regular tune-ups, entropy will work its magic and most things will start experiencing issues, eventually providing sub-par performance. A regular tune-up allows us to tighten, align, lubricate, and prevent potential issues, giving us a much smoother ride. This article will help your school conduct a coaching tune-up.



Nathan (17) and Christian (12) just before Nathan's pedal started loosening.
Nathan's smile didn't stick around too long after this.

A few years ago I was asked to facilitate some professional learning with all of the elementary instructional coaches in a large school district. Coaching was fairly new in that district and the experience of coaches seemed to be all over the board. I was surprised at the frustration expressed by some of the coaches:

- My principal said he'd rather have the coaching FTE go toward hiring another classroom teacher. He doesn't value coaching or what I do.
- I'm planning to go back to the classroom next year because coaching has been such a negative experience for me. My position is confusing to everybody, including me.
- As soon as I became a coach my relationship with the teachers in my building changed. They see me more as an administrator and are hesitant to work with me.
- I feel more isolated than ever. I no longer have a team and don't know where I belong.
- This position is not what I expected. More often than not I'm the emergency sub, recess aide, or secretary. I rarely engage in deep, rich learning with teachers or teams.

These were well-intentioned, top-notch educators whose schools may have benefitted from a coaching tune-up. Let's take a minute to pull instructional coaching out of the proverbial garage and give it a basic tune-up.

Tune-Up Question 1: Has your school leadership team set coaches up for success, publicly valuing and privately supporting the work of coaches?

Instructional coaching done well can be an absolute gift, but it has only been in the last decade or so that it has become a widespread practice in schools. "Coaching facilitates learning that sticks" (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran, 2018, p. 3) and helps teachers, teams, and leaders translate learning from larger-scale PD days, conferences, and book studies into daily classroom practices that last (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Killion & Harrison, 2006). When coaches are included on the school leadership team and invited to take an active role in planning and delivering professional development, they can then effectively support teachers and teams in applying that learning into their ongoing practice.

Coaching is not just two friends casually shooting the breeze about whatever comes to mind. Elena Aguilar points out: "I've occasionally heard teachers reflecting on previous experiences with coaches: 'We just sat around and talked,' or 'Every time we met, we talked about something different. I got feedback on every area of teaching.' When coaching is unfocused, or when the purpose for coaching is unclear, both the coach and client can feel unsatisfied" (2013, p. 120). We should not expect coaches to act as program enforcers, people fixers, evaluators, or therapists. We as school leaders should frame coaching in a way that coaches are seen as partners, peers and "critical friends, simultaneously providing support and empowering teachers to see areas where they can improve" and making it as "easy as possible for teachers to implement new practice" (Knight, 2007, p. 26, 32). Sweeney & Mausbach provide some helpful distinctions in the table below (2018, p. 19).

Coaching is	Coaching Isn't
A partnership	Evaluative
Focused on student learning	Focused on making teachers do things
Good for our students	About fixing teachers
Outcomes and standards-based	A waste of time
Driven by teachers' goals	Driven by the administrator, coach, or district
Flexible and responsive	Fixed and inflexible
Fun and interesting	Something to avoid

Tune-Up Question 2: To what extent does your school offer coaching as one of many safe options for pursuing improvement?

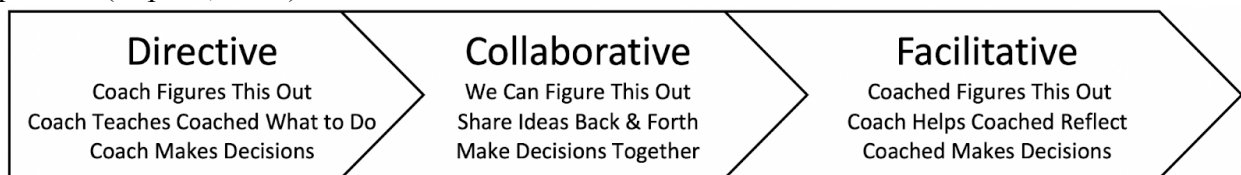
Early in my career I was asked to coach a struggling teacher. This teacher had 20+ years of experience and had just failed her principal evaluation. I was a peer on her team and had never been trained as a coach. We were both very uncomfortable with this arrangement, but since it had come as a mandate from the principal, we moved forward. After observing her teach, we sat down, talked for a minute about some of her successes and challenges, and then I promptly engaged in an ego-stroking expertise dump. I shared ideas, resources, and best practices, confirming to myself and this teacher that I was indeed a master teacher, and that she was indeed, well below me. Needless to say, that was not a great way to make coaching safe, and we were both relieved when this coaching assignment soon ended. This situation may have turned out better had this teacher chosen coaching as her preferred path to improvement, as suggested by Jim Knight: “Rather than telling teachers they must work with coaches, we suggest principals focus on the teaching practice that must change, and offer the coach as one way the teacher can bring about the needed change” (2007, p. 98). Of course we can be tight in expecting each educator to set and pursue goals for improvement; offering coaching as one option for pursuing that improvement creates safe conditions for the coach and coachee to make real progress.

This failed coaching experience may have also turned out very differently had we as a school truly believed in and followed Jim Knight’s partnership principles (2022, p. 6).

1. Equality. Everyone is valuable and has the same worth.
2. Choice. I will only get commitment from others if I honor their autonomy.
3. Voice. I want to know what my conversation partner has to say.
4. Reflection. I will help my partner look back, look at the present, and look ahead.
5. Dialogue. Conversation is back and forth.
6. Praxis. Learning happens best through action.
7. Reciprocity. I expect to learn from my conversation partner.

Tune-Up Question 3: How has your school allowed coaches to differentiate their work?

Just as teachers differentiate their approach to students with different strengths and needs, we should allow coaches to differentiate their approach based on the readiness of those they’re coaching. Schools run into trouble when they prescribe a one-size-fits-all coaching approach, mandating that coaches work with each educator in the same way. Some schools have found the developmental supervision approach helpful in allowing coaches to differentiate the support they provide (Zepeda, 2017).



It is usually advisable to start with a more collaborative approach and move to more directive or facilitative approaches based on the circumstances and the needs of those being coached.

Tune-Up Question 4: How might you expand the influence of the coach by asking them to work with individuals, teams, and leaders?

A coach that only works with individual teachers is like a cyclist that only uses first gear. Yes, you can still make progress by staying on the same gear, but you can generate much more momentum and synergy by strategically using different combinations of gears at appropriate times. While coaching individual teachers can certainly be a good way to build capacity, supporting the individual improvement of teachers in isolation is not enough for lasting change, and it's impossible for one coach to consistently reach every teacher. Fullan and Knight warn, "School improvement will fail if the work of coaches remains at the one-to-one level. Coaches are system leaders. They need development as change agents at both the instructional level and the level of organizational and system change. It is time to recast their role as integral to the whole-system reform" (Fullan & Knight, 2011). Indeed, "proponents of team coaching argue that coaching an individual without attempting to influence the immediate human systems in which they operate reduces the impact of the coaching intervention" (Clutterbuck, 2018, p. 280). Many schools have found that their coaches can better improve individual teacher capacity and system capacity by working with teams at the school. This not only allows the coach to work with more teachers, it also sets up the systems of support teachers need for sustained improvement. Barr and colleagues point out: "The likelihood of using new learning and sharing responsibility rises when colleagues guided by a coach, work together and hold each other accountable for improved teaching and learning (as cited in Many et al., 2018, p. 31).

Consider having your coach work with the following teams when appropriate:

Collaborative Teacher Teams. Teachers receive a lot of training on how to teach more effectively, but very little support in how to work together effectively. As the coach helps a teacher team collaborate more effectively, each teacher on the team becomes a peer coach to his or her teammates. Now, each teacher benefits from the coaching of every other member of the team, not just the coaching of the formal instructional coach.

Leadership Teams. Coaches often work with individual team leaders to improve their leadership of their respective teams. Real synergy is achieved when the coach works with a leadership team composed of several team leaders, helping them learn from and support each other in their leadership of their collaborative teacher teams. The coach also works with the leadership team in planning and delivering professional development and supporting that learning in ongoing ways.

Administrative Team. "Principals and building-level leaders in K-12 education deserve a good coach as well" (Reason, 2014, p. 13). What better way to model the importance of coaching than to have the administrative team working with a coach?

While this expanded view of coaching can really provide some very needed coherence and alignment of support, schools should take care not to spread the coach too thin. The coach cannot be everything to everybody. Your school will need to get really clear on what activities take priority at certain times.

Tune-Up Question 5: How do we all get on the same page about the prioritized roles of coaches at our school?

The coach's roles should be collaboratively defined by the school's instructional leadership team and administrative team answering questions like:

- How should coaches spend their time?
- What activities are of the highest priority?
- Are there some activities that coaches should avoid?

As we clarify coaching roles, let's remember that coaches should not be seen or used as an administrator. One principal shared how she avoids the coach-as-administrator perception: We moved the coach's "office to a small classroom in another part of the building. It gives her greater access to classrooms, provides a more appropriate conference space, and helps defend against the false premise that she is part of the administration here. I am careful not to ask her any questions that would require an evaluation of staff, and if I do stumble into that territory, have made it clear to [the coach] that she should feel free to remind me that type of question is off-limits."(Spaulding & Smith, 2012, p. 48). Additionally, while difficult, we should avoid using coaches as utility players or permanent first responders for the many crises that arise. There will likely be rare occasions when a coach needs to cover a class or help with bus duty, but this should definitely not be the norm. Finally, we need to attend to the growth, learning, and wellbeing of our coaches by finding ways for them to receive coaching as well.

I've included a form at the end of this article that many schools have found helpful in clarifying the coach's roles and defining the priorities the school has for the coach. Feel free to revise this in any way that is helpful to your context.

Conclusion

Don't let the lack of regular tune-ups transform coaching from something pleasant and helpful into something frustrating. I invite you, your leadership team, and your entire faculty to reflect on these coaching tune-up questions, and then perform any needed tightening, aligning, or lubricating so that coaching can enjoy a smooth ride as your school progresses together toward higher vistas.

1. Has your school leadership team set coaches up for success, publicly valuing and privately supporting the work of coaches?
2. To what extent does your school offer coaching as one of many safe options for pursuing improvement?
3. How has your school allowed coaches to differentiate their work?
4. How might you expand the influence of the coach by asking them to work with individuals, teams, and leaders?
5. How do we all get on the same page about the prioritized roles of coaches at our school?

Coaching Priorities & Plans

Coach, Principal, & Leadership Team should review this together
 0=Avoid, 1 = Low Priority, 2 = Medium Priority, 3= Top Priority

Rating	Possible Activity for Coach
	Attend administrative team mtgs.
	Attend conferences & district professional development classes
	Attend intervention team/student support meetings
	Attend PLC team meetings
	Attend PTA meetings
	Attend SCC meetings
	Attend team leader meetings
	Brief classroom walk throughs
	Co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess lessons with coached teachers
	Coach & be coached by other coaches
	Coach collaborative teacher teams and support their PLC goals
	Coach individual teachers
	Coach team leaders on how to lead their collaborative teams
	Community and faculty events planner
	Conduct teacher evaluations
	Facilitate a faculty book/article study
	Facilitate new teacher induction & mentoring
	Facilitate lesson study & peer observation/coaching
	Help plan/deliver professional development
	Help with parent conferences
	Help with student council and student leadership
	Help with student discipline
	Lunch/recess supervision
	Meet regularly with leadership team to review my efforts
	Oversee fundraising
	Oversee test administration
	Oversee school PR (newsletter, website, social media, etc.)
	Serve as LEA at IEPs
	Student attendance support
	Student counseling or discipline
	Sub in classes
	Supervise extra-curricular activities
	Supervise student 504 plans
	Teacher and student tech support

My purpose as a coach at this school is:	
Here's when I will consistently meet with the principal:	
When I come to work, my physical home base is:	
I should attend the following meetings:	
I should spend the bulk of my time on:	
If time allows, I may also spend some time on:	
Activities I should avoid are:	
I will continue to build my capacity as a coach by:	

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