

Literacy Coaching Advice: Cultivating Healthy Working Relationships with Teachers

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Abstract

This article addresses ways that literacy coaches can form and sustain effective working relationships with teachers. The author has combined firsthand experience as a literacy coach with a review of the literature as it pertains to teacher/coach relationships. There are several common themes that appear in the literature as advice for this aspect of coaching work. It is suggested that coaches begin the process by being approachable and understanding their role in the school and ensuring that others know it as well. Tips for how to be visible, establish trust, and collaborate with teachers are also provided. The “domino effect,” where teachers who were previously resistant to work with the literacy coach begin to see the benefits, is also discussed.

Picture it: Two outstanding teachers are told in August that, starting with the coming school year, they will serve as literacy coaches in their respective schools. They sit across from their principals, in shock about this huge shift in employment. Their minds wander from thoughts of blissfully working with their adorable students to...TEACHERS.

Whether you are an instructional coach in a new school or in a school where you have previously been a classroom teacher, this new role is very different, and carries with it excitement, assumptions, rumors, and everything in between. Hold on though, because before rushing into classrooms, you must build strong *coaching relationships* with teachers. This step is often overlooked for two reasons: the natural sense of urgency that a new role brings and the misconception that accomplishing this is simple. Coaches might think they just do not have the time to get to know the teachers with whom they will be working; however, it is time well invested that will pave the way for coaching. To meet the challenges of building strong working relationships with teachers, coaches need to know their role, be visible, and create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration (see Figure 1).

Having served as a coach in schools where I was both the new kid on the block as well as a teacher in the same school, I offer this advice.

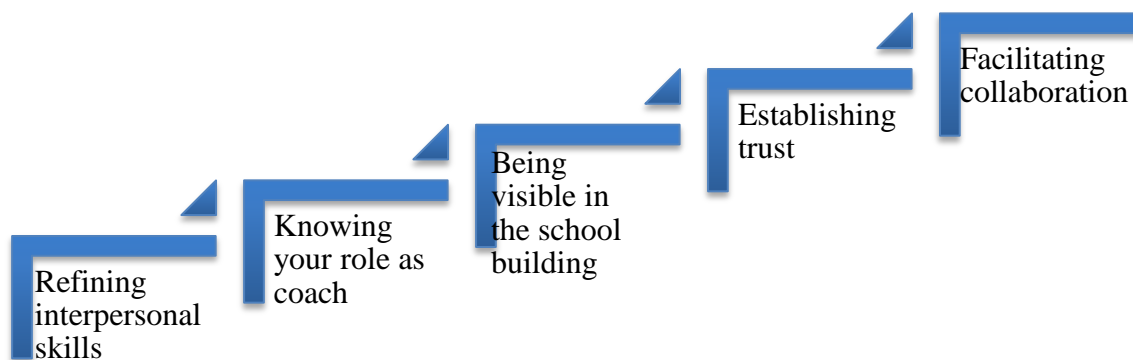


Figure 1. Steps to Building a Teacher/Coach Relationship

Refining interpersonal skills

Becky was a classroom teacher at a school where I had just been hired. She made up her mind not to like me before she even met me. She avoided me at all costs and left me out of conversations during weekly grade level meetings. I tried not to take it personally, but I knew we would not be able to do the work needed at our school if this continued. There is a point when a coach has to accept that perhaps the only way to get through to teachers like this is to be overly kind, which is exactly what I did. By mid-year, this same teacher was asking for my assistance with her literacy teaching.

Literacy coaching requires more than possessing content and pedagogical knowledge. These qualities are desirable, but will only get a coach so far. Hunt and Handsfield (2013) add to these the “emotional aspects and challenges of the work” (p. 73), such as building relationships with teachers, and this work appears frequently in the literature related to successful instructional coaching (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013, Ippolito, 2010; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). Teachers are the owners of their classrooms, and their classrooms are often second homes – personal spaces where they choose what happens and when it happens. Coaches have to understand that they are outsiders, and even if they have previously been a part of a school’s faculty, they are now serving in a very different role that requires them to enter these personal spaces. It is up to the coach to maneuver this process delicately and seamlessly.

Interpersonal skills are paramount to being an effective coach (Casey, 2006; Ertmer et al., 2005; Jay, 2009). When school principals hire for a coaching position, they are looking for someone who works well with everyone. Knight (2004) equates this with being “flexible” and “likable” (p. 35). Being “likable” means something different to each coach and each teacher. This means that the coach needs to learn what each teacher thinks likability is. For one teacher, it may mean that the coach stops in and says hello every day. For others, simply leaving a complementary note after classroom visits is suitable. And still for others, a smile can go a long way. Although some might argue that coaches do not need to be liked by every teacher, it certainly does not hurt.

Knowing Your Role as a Coach

I accepted a literacy coach position in a school that had not previously had one. I had been a coach before and understood the nature of the work. My principal and the teachers had other ideas. The principal was fond of asking me to “fix” certain teachers, even locating me in a classroom near these teachers so that I could be ever watchful of what was occurring in those classrooms. Some of the teachers confused my role with that of a reading specialist, asking me to “fix” their students who struggled with reading. It took time to help the faculty see me as one who was there to support teachers’ professional growth. I accomplished this by meeting with the teachers and explaining my role and talking transparently with my principal to share our visions for the coaching initiative.

Even in schools where literacy coaches have been fixtures for a while, there are usually questions about the coach’s role. The entire school community needs to understand the coach’s job description. This cannot be emphasized enough, because if this is made perfectly clear before the school year starts, there is a better chance of harmony amongst the staff (McGatha, 2008). In fact, “the role of coach must be defined *before* [emphasis added] trusting relationship[s] can be formed” (Ertmer et al., 2005, p. 35).

So, what do coaches do and what don’t they do? Plainly stated, a coach is not an evaluator (Hunt & Handsfield, 2013; L’Allier, Piper, & Bean, 2010). This understanding must be in place from the beginning, and the principal, especially, needs to internalize this in order for it to filter down to the teachers. Also, coaches who put themselves in the position of expert will, at some point, let their teachers down. Certainly, expert knowledge about one’s content area and how children learn is part of the job; however, to pigeonhole the coach in this manner reinforces the “banking” model of education (Freire, 1970, p. 72), implying that the coach is all-knowing and only to be used for the acquisition of answers. Lynch and Ferguson (2010) actually advise coaches not to provide feedback to teachers unless they are specifically asked for it. Otherwise, this can be threatening to teachers (Gibson, 2006) and automatically lands the coach the role of evaluator.

Considering the title of this kind of position, “coach” or sometimes “facilitator” provides us with hints of the responsibilities. The International Literacy Association (2007) defines the literacy coach as one who provides teachers “with the additional support needed to implement...programs and practices” (p. 2). This support might include modeling lessons for teachers, providing professional development, and/or observing classroom instruction. Most importantly, the coach’s role is to lift teachers’ thinking about instruction in order to have a positive impact on student learning. This is accomplished through one-to-one conversations where coaches and teachers problem-solve together (Knight, year; L’Allier et al., 2010). L’Allier et al. (2010) suggest that coaches “focus their discussions on how to address the needs of students - rather than on the strengths or weaknesses of a teacher’s instruction” (p. 547). This signals to the teacher that the coach is interested in acting as a peer and partner, not an overseer.

Being Visible in the School Building

Prior to becoming a literacy coach, I was a classroom teacher and reading specialist, and it was important to me that the teachers with whom I worked saw me as a teacher and that I possessed the passion and skills needed to teach students how to grow as readers and writers. At the beginning of each school year, I made it a goal to get into every classroom as soon as possible. I

did this by having teachers sign up for a time for me to read aloud to their classes. When I visited each classroom, I was sure to bring an engaging book, read it aloud in an Oscar-worthy manner, and include a teaching point or two. This was my way in, as many teachers not only appreciated the guest reading, but also commented how they learned something new about teaching through read alouds.

In addition to informing stakeholders of their various duties, it is imperative that the coach's work is evident in and around the school. This starts before the school year does, as, during the waning days of summer, the literacy coach walks the halls casually and makes early and easygoing contact with teachers. L'Allier et al. (2010) mention one successful coach who offers to help set up teachers' classroom libraries. It is key for coaches to be highly visible, especially in common areas (Casey, 2006; L'Allier et al., 2010), by stepping out into the halls, visiting the teachers' lounge or taking a walk outside when teachers are out at recess with their classes. They should also note when grade level planning times are and check in with teachers during those moments. Teachers are extremely busy people. Even if they are told during the beginning of year faculty meeting and through email what times their literacy coach is available, this information may be forgotten. It is up to the coach to seek out teachers - not the other way around. These visits should be informal and friendly, and it is important that the coach walks around with a smile on his or her face, rather than a look of constant intention. In addition to these suggestions, Jay (2009) recommends that coaches make short visits to classrooms and comment positively about what they see. Yet another way literacy coaches can be visible in the school is to attend grade-level meetings and after-school workshops with teachers, thus encouraging teachers to view them as colleagues rather than supervisors (L'Allier et al., 2010).

Establishing Trust

Shortly after beginning my first literacy coaching position, my principal asked me in one of our weekly meetings to report on teachers. Speechless at first, I did my best to address her request and at the same time maintain some confidentiality by focusing on what I noticed the students doing, remaining objective as I discussed instruction. This was a part of the job I was not prepared for and found quite uncomfortable. How could I expect teachers to allow me to spend hours in their classrooms each week if they knew I was sharing every little thing they did, better or worse, with their administrators?

A coach does not automatically gain trust the first day on the job. She has to work diligently to lay the groundwork. Trust is a prerequisite to engaging in serious work with teachers (Costa & Garmston, 1994). This involves confidentiality, follow-through, equality, and getting to know teachers.

Experts on coaching agree that, in order to gain and keep trust, it is crucial to maintain confidentiality (Bean & DeFord, 2007; Ertmer et al., 2005; L'Allier et al., 2010). There are administrators who sometimes, and possibly with good intentions, choose to use coaches as their eyes and ears in the school. In other words, what happens in coaching conversations should stay in coaching conversations. This is not to say that regular communication with the principal is not necessary, but coaches need to be mindful when sharing observations with administrators. For example, a principal might ask a coach how Mr. Smith is carrying out guided reading lessons in his classroom. The coach might say, "I have been in Mr. Smith's classroom frequently and we are working with his students on vocabulary strategies." This keeps the focus on the students,

rather than saying, “I have been in Mr. Smith’s classroom and I can tell you that he is not teaching guided reading groups effectively or often enough.” Once a teacher hears that her or his coach is sharing everything with the principal, any bond that has been created most likely will be destroyed.

Another aspect of trust that often appears in the literature on coaching is following through. If a teacher reaches out to the coach, which in some cases may be a huge step on the part of that teacher, the coach is obligated to reply immediately (Bean & DeFord, 2007; L’Allier et al., 2010). Again, once a commitment is broken, even just one time, a signal is sent to the teacher that the coach is unreliable, and the teacher will be less likely to ask for assistance again.

Coaches should start building relationships with teachers early and take a step back and get to know teachers as people first by finding out what their interests are. It is important to purposefully make time for casual conversation with teachers and inquire about their families and hobbies. They can also initiate a relationship by doing the teaching, rather than observing, at the beginning of the school year (Jay, 2009). Teachers are usually pleased when a coach asks to try out a lesson with their classes. This also allows the coach to get to know students. Casey (2006) notes that, when teachers watch coaches successfully teach their students, trust is formed. It is also advisable to conduct initial classroom visits empty-handed, because when a teacher sees a coach enter the room armed with notepad and pen, it may be automatically assumed that he or she is there to observe, take notes, and report back to administration. Coaches are urged to save the note taking for later. When fortunate enough to be welcomed into a classroom, they need to reciprocate that with a positive attitude and a delightful presence.

Lastly, to maintain a trusting relationship with teachers, coaches are to be mindful of treating teachers as equal colleagues who learn alongside one another (Ertmer et al., 2005). Every interaction with teachers should be as positive as it can be, building on a teacher’s strengths, just as one would do with students. Also, it takes conscious effort to see teachers through a lens of assistance and empowerment, rather than evaluation. When engaging in coaching conversations, it is important coaches remain nonjudgmental, focusing on the facts and the students. Knight (2004) maintains “partnership, at its core, is a deep belief that we are no more important than those with whom we work, and we should do everything we can to respect that equality” (p. 33).

Facilitating Collaboration

When I accepted my second coaching position, I was comfortable with the position, as I had been successful in growing teachers’ literacy knowledge and had helped make positive changes in classroom instruction for the benefit of the school as a whole and for the students. What I did not realize is that I did not yet truly understand how to “coach” teachers. What I had been doing, I soon learned, was “consulting.” While consulting is valuable, it is quite different from a one-to-one conversation in which the teacher contributes ideas as well. I was fortunate to also have a coach who visited me each week and guided me through explorations of true coaching experiences in which the coach helps teachers reflect and plan. What stuck with me after this experience was the discourse I could use to help teachers come to conclusions that they might not come to on their own.

Coaches talk for a living. After all, they begin as teachers - figuring out exact language to use to reach students. Communicating with adults requires a different skill-set, and Knight

(2009) asserts that a coach must be a “master of effective communication” (p. 511). To strive for this level, coaches have to spend time with teachers throughout each and every school day. This practice will help them become comfortable talking with teachers (Gibson, 2006). As coaches reach a relaxed level of conversation, it is then time to work on what is perhaps the most critical piece of effective communication: listening. Teachers want to know that they are being listened to and that their ideas are respected. This listening involves eye contact, open body posture, and sometimes calls for a nodding of the head, an inserted “mm-hmm,” and brief paraphrasing.

Often in conferences with teachers, coaches might wonder if they are saying “the right things.” Instead, coaches might focus on the kinds of comments they are making and ask themselves a few questions. Are my replies positive? Am I speaking in a way that invites collaborative thinking? What about the way I say things – can the teacher be sure that I am sincere? These experiences are all about perception. If teachers feel they are “under attack, their...reaction is to resist” (Knight, 2009, p. 511).

It is this author’s belief that coaches are in schools to empower teachers and lift them to the next level of teaching. This entails meeting the teacher where he or she is (Bean, 2010). Each teacher is unique in that they have varying interests and are at different places in their learning. An effective coach works to figure out these things and knows when and how to engage in shared thinking with teachers (Ippolito, 2010). This process not only helps to build capacity; it can also “boost teachers’ self-efficacy” (Shanklin, 2006, p. 2).

The Domino Effect

Let’s return to the story I shared near the beginning of this article about Becky, a teacher who was insistent on not working with me, her literacy coach. In addition to being extremely kind to her, I also had another plan. Her teammates were new teachers who were desperately seeking help in their classrooms. So I invested a lot of time planning with them and helping them implement best teaching practices. After Becky had listened to us excitedly discuss what was occurring in their classrooms, she pulled me aside one day and asked me how she could be a part of all this. This is the beauty of the “domino effect.”

Anyone who has worked in a school understands the power of words and how fast they travel. Teachers talk to their grade level and content area teammates, they talk to one another in common gathering areas, and they talk to administrators. Coaches need to consider this and decide when teachers talk about them, what will they say?

First off, although it is generally understood that coaches are change agents, it is not a coach’s primary purpose to “establish immediate and positive instructional improvement” (Gibson, 2006, p. 315). Nor is it wise for a principal to require all teachers or a select few to work with the coach. The suggested method of creating change is to begin slowly, working with teachers who desire assistance (Bean & DeFord, 2007; Lynch & Ferguson, 2010). This process takes time and involves being visible and getting to know the teachers, as discussed earlier. Which teachers work well with their teams? Who are the extroverts? For this author, a former literacy coach, this search was quite easy. A certain teacher frequently reached out for guidance, igniting a lifelong professional relationship. And eventually, other teachers caught wind of the work this teacher was doing, viewed it as something positive, and wanted to be involved. Eventually, the goal is for a coach to be involved with every teacher, even those who are resistant. Once one or two see the benefits that are attached to working with a coach, word will spread.

So remember: to have a truly successful coaching initiative, you have to invest some serious time and energy up front because “developing trusting relationships is essential to the literacy coach’s success” (Casey, 2006, p. 5). I leave you with the words of Greg Mortensen (2007), the author of *Three Cups of Tea* who built both schools and relationships.

Haji Ali taught me to share three cups of tea, to slow down and make building relationships as important as building projects. He taught me that I had more to learn from the people I work with than I could ever hope to teach them (p. 79).

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