

# Characteristics of Effective Coaches

## Introduction to the Coach's Role

For the instructional coach, piecing together a job description gives rise to many questions: Where do I begin? What's the ultimate goal of my work? How do I structure my time? When do I get into classrooms? How do I connect with challenging staff members? What do I do if a colleague is resistant? And, most important, how do I get teachers to *want* to make positive changes within their classrooms?

Instructional coaches begin by looking at themselves. As was said so eloquently by Richard Henry Dunn, "He who dares to teach must never cease to learn" (Fiore & Whitaker, 2005, p. 148).

## What Makes an Effective Coach?

Just as an impressive résumé does not ensure an employee's effectiveness, experience, content knowledge, and teaching skill do not guarantee success in a coaching position. Individuals seeking to thrive in this realm must possess and cultivate a slew of other interpersonal and professional skills. Let's take a few moments to look at the characteristics of an effective coach.

**An effective coach is highly self-reflective.** You can't teach others what you don't first embrace yourself. John Dewey defined *reflection* as "turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious consecutive consideration. It enables us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion" (1933, p. 3). The ability to ruminate and to critically analyze your own performance and personal attitudes cannot be overstated. The most effective coach will not have all the answers, but his or her inquiry-approach to learning, awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, and desire to grow professionally will be evident to all. Self-reflection is at the heart of all he or she does.

**An effective coach is able to build and maintain trustworthy relationships.** Think of the last time someone convinced you to make a significant change in your life. Maybe it was giving up smoking, taking up exercising, or even changing religions. Who was the person who helped to persuade you? Most likely, it was a person you are very close with—someone you respect and trust. Effective coaches have strong interpersonal and people skills. They realize the importance

Source: From *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches and School Leaders* (pp. 33–38), by P. Hall and A. Simeral, 2008, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. Copyright 2008 by ASCD.

of connecting, cultivating, nurturing, and developing relationships. They understand that a teacher is much more likely to take part in a learning venture with someone he or she trusts. They also understand that a teacher is much more likely to resist being asked to change by someone with whom he or she has no connection.

**An effective coach is skilled in recognizing others' strengths, abilities, and beliefs.** It is becoming clearer and clearer to us that "successful people, in any field, work out of their strengths, not their weaknesses" (Kise, 2006, p. 12).

The prevalent mind-set in today's world is that we must identify our weaknesses and work to improve them in order to better ourselves. Collectively, we seem to hold the belief that an individual's greatest capacity for growth is found in his or her weaknesses, but that perception couldn't be further from the truth. Our strengths are what drive us; they propel us to do what we do. For coaches, effectiveness comes from recognizing and helping to refine an individual's strengths and talents, seeing potential where others see shortcomings.

**An effective coach is a servant leader.** For servant leaders, true power in leadership does not come from the ability to dictate or command; rather, it comes from having a clear vision and the desire and wisdom to guide others toward a common goal. Greenleaf (1970) defines the role as "one who seeks to draw out, inspire, and develop the best and highest within people from the inside out" (p. 3). He goes on to say, "Leadership becomes an interdependent work rather than an immature interplay between strong, independent, ego-driven rulers and compliant dependent followers" (p. 11). Effective coaches should think of themselves as servant first: supporting teachers behind the scenes and seeking to make everyone else an expert rather than touting themselves as the only source of expertise. This attitude is key to coaching success.

**An effective coach is patient.** Genuine change doesn't occur overnight; it is gradual and deliberate. Effective coaches recognize slight improvements and notice the "baby steps" that teachers make, but they also recognize that change is difficult and sometimes tedious work. To truly change, one must invest a great deal of time. Coaches who walk alongside teachers and share in the incremental successes will find that success really does beget further success.

**An effective coach considers "the bus question."** Imagine that on the way home from work tomorrow, you, an instructional coach, are hit by a bus. Facing a long recovery period and unable

to return to the job for a long time, one question looms large in your mind: How are teachers better off for having worked with you? Has your coaching helped them to embrace meaningful change, build their capacity, increase their instructional skill, and strengthen their self-reflective tendencies? Have you acted merely as a stop-gap, covering up their weaknesses, or has your work built upon their strengths and helped to create better learning environments for their students? Effective coaches answer affirmatively and can provide reams of data and anecdotal evidence to support this claim.

### *Pete's Perspective*

---

As a principal, I have worked with a variety of instructional coaches. Each one has operated under a slightly different title (some of which I made up), but they have all been responsible for working alongside, in front of, and slightly behind the instructional staff in my schools. Some of the coaches were incredibly effective, garnering impressive levels of individual and collective professional development and increased student achievement. Others floundered and left us all scratching our heads. What was the difference?

Quite simply, the difference was in their people skills. I realize this characteristic is difficult to quantify, but anyone who has ever interacted with another human being knows exactly what I'm referring to. People skills are the common thread that weaves together the six characteristics of an effective coach . . . those undeniable elements of someone's personality that can determine whether we laugh or grimace, invite or shun, grow or wither. When the time comes to hire a coach, rummage through the top candidates' figurative closets to ensure that their personality traits and people skills match your school's needs. A good deal of your future success hangs on that decision.

### **Relationships, Relationships, Relationships**

A recent study conducted at the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning found that within six weeks of starting a new school year, 85 percent of teachers who worked with instructional coaches implemented at least one new instructional strategy (Knight, 2004). By contrast, a separate study on traditional inservice programs (one-shot workshops or presentations) revealed

a dismal 10 percent implementation rate (Showers, Murphy, & Joyce, 1996). Clearly, it's worth repeating: "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship" (Comer, 1995).

Not only do coaches need to be as skilled as classroom teachers and have a vast repertoire of scientifically proven practices to share, but they must also be able to initiate and maintain personal relationships. This includes identifying individuals' strengths and limitations, degree and elements of motivation, work ethic, beliefs, interests, vision, educational background, formative experiences, and professional goals (Kise, 2006). Each of these factors really does play a significant role in the education occurring daily in that teacher's classroom—a larger role, possibly, than that of the curriculum.

Before a coach jumps into the Continuum of Self-Reflection framework, which we'll formally introduce in the next chapter, he or she must first build rapport with each member on staff. Without a solid relationship in place, it's unrealistic to expect the strategies articulated in the Continuum to lead to significant gains. Margaret Wheatley, author of *Leadership and the New Science*, shares this insight: "In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than tasks, functions, roles, and positions" (Secretan, 2004, p. 27).

So, as a coach, how do you begin? You begin by spending as much time as you can with teachers, getting to know them and allowing them to get to know you. Volunteering to help is a great place to start. You might offer to work in a teacher's classroom for a short time each day or to help with making copies, putting up a bulletin board, or other odd jobs. Ask teachers to join you for coffee or for a walk during lunch. Instead of putting handouts in teachers' mailboxes, deliver them personally, with a smile. Make it your goal to get into every classroom at least twice a week, and when you're there, look for opportunities to do the following:

- Identify and acknowledge the teacher's individual strengths.
- Validate the teacher's good ideas and ways of doing things.
- Recognize the teacher's areas of talent or personal interest, and connect them to your own.
- Ask questions to engage the teacher on a personal and professional level.

Remember that teachers need to feel comfortable enough with you to be honest, show their weaknesses, and become vulnerable. There must be enough mutual trust and respect that the teacher will respond to being asked to change at such a personal level. The authors of *Issues in Mentoring* state, "Mentoring demands befriending. While it is difficult to delineate all of the behaviors associated with befriending, two critical ones stand out: accepting and relating" (Kerry & Mayes, 1995, p. 31).

When a teacher and a coach can enter into a collaborative relationship with the expressed goal of learning together, the results are advantageous to all. Not only do both teacher and coach enhance their professional skills, but by working together, they also engage in the practice of reflection. Ultimately, the students reap the benefits. It's a win-win-win situation.

## Self-Reflection

Not all change is good. We recognize that, so the question becomes this: How do you teach teachers to resist the "bad" changes and seek out the "good" ones? The answer lies in a simple yet profound concept: self-reflection. It's not the *doing* that matters, said revered educator John Dewey, "it's the *thinking* about the doing" (quoted in Archambault, 1974, p. 321, emphasis added). Whether the teacher is a leading expert on best practices or a new educator who knows very little about how to run a classroom, what matters most is the teacher's personal level of self-reflection. In fact, we believe that a teacher's ability to self-reflect is directly linked to his or her classroom effectiveness. Self-reflection, therefore, is a fundamental component building a teacher's capacity for success.

Daudelin and Hall (1997) describe reflective learning as "the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder carefully and persistently its meaning . . . to reflect on the learning that is occurring" (p. 13). The coaching framework we propose through the Strength-Based School Improvement model is based on the idea that individuals who are self-reflective will exhibit these characteristics:

- They will think about their thinking (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983).
- They will have an increased awareness of personal strengths and weaknesses, becoming more effective and efficient as professionals (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984).

- They will be increasingly intentional in their instruction—know what they are doing and why they are doing it (Perry, 1998; Schön, 1983).
- They will demonstrate more sensitivity to how their instruction affects their students (McCarthy, 1996; Schön, 1983; Wolcott & Lynch, 1997).
- They will be more open to mandated changes from within their building, district, and state (Dewey, 1933; Furlong & Maynard, 1995).
- They will be more collaborative and actively participate in professional learning communities (Eyler, Giles, & Schmeide, 1996; Guskin, 1994).
- They will be intrinsically motivated to continue learning and empowered to seek new ways to better themselves (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984).

The skill of self-reflection transcends all other skills, strategies, and teaching approaches because it can grow over the course of a teacher's career and enable the teacher to cultivate and solidify all of his or her professional learning. In *Systems for Change in Literacy Education*, master educators Carol A. Lyons and Gay Su Pinnell point out, "You do not learn to be a good teacher of reading and writing in a few months, in a year, or even over a period of several years. Teaching skills develop over a lifetime" (2001, p. ix). This is the impact an effective instructional coach can make when he or she guides teachers in a proper direction using a feasible framework: the Continuum of Self-Reflection.