

Hey Instructional Coach, What Do You Do?



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As a new school year begins, many educators are stepping into new careers as instructional coaches. Others are welcoming instructional coaches to their schools. Although people in either position likely have a lot of enthusiasm about this newish role in schools, that enthusiasm might be tempered if an important question goes unanswered: “What does an instructional coach *do*?”

I’ve spent more than two decades describing, studying, and validating coaching. I’d like to share a bit about what I’ve learned as I’ve tried to answer that question.

Not Quite Like Sports Coaches

Relying on a coach has become a popular form of professional learning in almost all walks of life. There are life coaches, athletic coaches, surgical coaches, even dating coaches. These types of coaching all share one goal—helping someone else get better at something important, whether it’s finding purpose in life or hitting a knuckle ball. Different professions, however, require coaches with different skills and approaches.

Instructional coaching is a specialized approach to supporting others’ learning. Like other coaches, instructional coaches (ICs) are intent on helping professionals, teachers in this case, get better at what they do. They know a lot about their chosen field—teaching. In other ways, however, what an instructional coach does is significantly different than what, say, a hockey coach does.

Five Maxims

I've found five maxims clarify the special skills, beliefs, and processes used by instructional coaches.

1. *A coach is a teacher talking with a teacher.* Although effective instructional coaches have expertise, they don't act like experts—they act like partners. The word *partner* tells us a lot about what coaches do. A partnership conversation is one between two people who have equal power. Partners don't make decisions for each other. In the best situations, partners listen to and respect each other. This means that instructional coaches interact in ways that ensure that collaborating teachers make the decisions about what happens in their classrooms. ICs don't simply observe a teacher's classroom and tell the teacher what they did right and what they need to work on. Rather, coaches create the conditions that empower teachers to take control of their own learning. (The remaining maxims describe setting ideal conditions for *teacher* learning.)

2. *Learning involves seeing reality as it is, not as we wish it to be.*¹ The perceptual errors that we all make and the defense mechanisms most of us employ combine to make it very difficult for us to see reality as it really is. Almost always, when professionals watch themselves on video, they're astonished by what they see—sometimes delighted, sometimes disappointed, rarely unsurprised. That's why players on just about every school football team watch themselves on game film after every game. Video is rocket fuel for learning because it gives us a clear picture of reality.

When educators don't have a clear picture of reality, they risk spending a lot of time learning strategies that don't address the real needs of their students. Equally important, since motivation is usually fueled by awareness of a discrepancy between our reality and our goals, a clear picture of reality is essential for a person to feel motivated about any opportunity for growth.

3. *If there's no goal, it's just a nice conversation.* I heard this saying from coaching expert John Campbell (who attributes it to coaching researcher Tony Grant). Effective instructional coaching is a goal-directed action. Goals give direction to coaching; they provide a finish line, and when they matter to teachers, goals propel the entire coaching process. If teachers don't have a goal, or if they are pursuing a goal they don't care about, the entire coaching process can be a waste of time. But when teachers pursue a powerful, student-focused goal that truly matters to them, unmistakable improvements happen in students' lives and learning.

4. *It's not about me.*² Whenever we work with others, we can feel strongly tempted to solve their problems for them. We lean in, our pupils dilate a little, and we feel a surge of energy to help this person clean up their mess. "Oh, I've had that issue," we might say, "let me tell you what you should do."

The problem is, as our energy goes up, the collaborating teacher's energy often goes down. If a coach does all the thinking for a teacher, it creates dependence, making it less likely that the teacher will be empowered to address issues independently.

By asking reflective questions, listening, and making nondirective suggestions, effective coaches empower teachers to come up with their own solutions, the essential outcome. I'm reminded of what coaching expert Tony Stoltzfus says in his workshops: a less optimal solution the coachee develops often produces better results than the "right answer" coming from the coach.

5. *Real learning happens in real life.* A person who wants to learn how to swim might get a lot out of watching swimming instructional videos on YouTube. Eventually, though, he will have to get wet.

Learning that we remember, that helps us do more and be more, usually only happens when we apply new knowledge, skills, or beliefs to our personal experiences or work. The same is true for teachers.

Coaches walk a tightrope between support and dialogue to ensure that such real-life learning occurs. On the one hand, they have a deep knowledge of effective teaching practice. On the other hand, they share that information tentatively and only when requested, so they empower teachers to carry out their own decisions and plans in their classrooms.

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A New Kind of Teacher Learning

The learning catalyzed by instructional coaching doesn't happen in workshops, but in classrooms. It's driven by *teachers'* energy. While this may seem radical, we can validate why instructional coaching works by thinking of our own experiences. We know that the most important changes we make in life are ones we choose for ourselves, and that we respond best to people who treat us like equals. We know that growth requires a clear picture of reality and a goal—and happens day-to-day. Most important, we know that when teachers learn more, students learn more. That's why we need - instructional coaches—and a deep understanding of what coaches do.

End Notes

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1 This maxim is a variation on a quotation often attributed to General Electric CEO, Jack Welch, "Face reality as it is, not as you want it to be."

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2 This maxim comes from coaching researcher Christian van Nieuwerburgh.



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