

# Thank you so much for the truth!

Coaching teachers requires that you develop trust – not just in the abstract but trust that is manifested in shared goals, open communication, and mutual respect.

## By Carla Finkelstein

I poked my head into Stephanie's classroom during her planning period and asked, tentatively, "Got a second?"

She looked up from the computer screen but didn't move. "OK," she said, then went back to typing.

I waited a moment. "So, did Mrs. Turner let you know I'd be coming by to talk about us starting a coaching cycle?" She nodded. The principal at this urban K-8 school where I'd been working as a literacy coach had asked me to coach Stephanie but shared concerns about this teacher's performance: Though Stephanie genuinely cared about her 2nd-grade students, she was on a performance improvement plan for sporadic attendance, poor lesson planning, and lack of rigor in her teaching.

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**Teacher distrust may stem from the hierarchical structure of schools, which reinforces power differentials between teachers and coaches.**

“Well,” I continued, “before we get into the details of coaching, it would help me to get a feel for your classroom. Can we schedule a time for me to do an interactive read-aloud? It will help me get to know your students, and you’ll get a chance to observe and share with me what you’ve noticed.”

“OK, when do you want to come?”

**The coach needs to respect the teacher’s autonomy by offering feedback only on agreed-upon goals.**

In this anecdote run threads of teacher resistance and a coach’s initial attempts to anticipate this resistance and begin to build trust. In my professional development (PD) experiences over the past dozen years, I have seen various iterations of teacher distrust, which can slow or derail the progress of teacher learning. This article chronicles my work with Stephanie during a two-month coaching cycle as we built a relationship that would support her and her students toward progress in reading.

### High-quality PD

Research has shown the benefits of long-term, job-embedded PD (Garet et al., 2001; Hawley & Valli, 2007) that is “grounded in inquiry, collaborative, sustained, connected to and derived from teachers’ work with their students, and tied explicitly to improving practice” (Neufeld & Roper, 2003, p. 3). The recently released *Mirage* report offers a stark reminder, though, that productive teacher learning does not occur consistently throughout the U.S. and, by implication, suggests that participation in inquiry-based and collaborative PD may not guarantee teacher improvement (TNTP, 2015). These characteristics are necessary but insufficient for promoting teachers’ engagement in productive learning because they underestimate the importance of the relationship between coach and teacher.

### Teacher resistance

Teacher resistance to PD should be no surprise. In many cases, teachers reasonably exhibit distrust when they believe the costs of engaging in PD outweigh the benefits. For example, job-embedded PD asks teachers to open their classrooms, which makes many teachers suspicious because they have

become acclimated to school cultures of surveillance and evaluation. In one recent study, suspected causes for teacher resistance include:

- A teacher’s perception that needing help is an admission of inadequacy;
- Change anxiety;
- Discomfort over examining one’s practice;
- Incurring the principal’s admonishment; and
- Fear that deficiencies unrelated to the presenting issue will be revealed (Gonzales et al., 2004).

Most of these causes relate to teachers’ anxieties about being judged or exposed as deficient. Indirectly, they suggest a school culture in which teachers feel primarily, if not solely, responsible for the success of their students.

Teacher distrust also may stem from the hierarchical structure of schools, which reinforces power differentials between teachers and coaches. For example:

- Coaches often sit on school leadership teams where they have access to the principal and hear privileged information.
- Principals may assign coaches to teachers who need improvement, which a teacher may construe as a move that highlights his or her deficiencies.
- Coaches, unlike teachers, have considerable control over their own schedules.

This organizational structure in which teachers almost always hold less power than coaches may foster teacher resistance.

### The coach’s responsibility

The coach is responsible for mitigating resistance. Unless the coach successfully does this, many teachers never sincerely engage in the learning process. In my experience, this distrust manifests itself in several ways: teacher avoidance, overt hostility, or shallow acquiescence. When describing resistant teachers, coaches tend to blame them for being hostile or defensive about examining their practice; principals and coaches often blame failed PD on disinterested or inadequate teachers. But far too many PD experiences fail because the coach did not lay the groundwork for building trust.

Both empirical and practitioner literature on PD pay minimal attention to trust building. For example, Dole (2004) offers one sentence of advice on this subject: “Once this coach had built a positive rapport with teachers, the teachers would be comfortable inviting the coach into their classrooms for feedback



and coaching” (p. 467). By its lack of specific attention to how coaches might build trusting relationships, such literature simplifies this complex process and implies that trust may be easily achieved.

### Recommendations

To build trusting relationships with teachers, I offer four recommendations, contextualized within the extended vignette of my work with Stephanie:

- #1. Let the teacher “drive” the PD.
- #2. Adopt a curious, problem-solving stance.
- #3. Walk the walk.
- #4. Communicate clearly and transparently.

These research-based recommendations stem from

findings about the influences of affect on cognition (Lee, 2008) and the importance of collaborative interactions to learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). They also build on school reform literature, which suggests that leaders work to develop teacher trust, acknowledge valid causes of teacher resistance, use that resistance as a springboard for collaborative problem solving, and commit resources to relational and community-building aspects of the work (Elmore, 2000; Fink & Resnick, 2001).

#### #1. Let the teacher “drive” the PD.

Before our initial goal-setting conversation, I visited Stephanie’s classroom twice — once to lead a read-aloud and once to watch a reading lesson. From these sessions, as well as through earlier conversations with the school’s leadership team, I developed some ideas about possible coaching goals.

As Stephanie and I sat, knees bumping the 2nd-grade desks, I explained that our purpose today was to establish clear expectations and a regular schedule for coaching. Next I asked Stephanie what her goals were for our work together. She hesitated. I rephrased, “What would you like to see your students be able to do this year in reading or writing?”

Stephanie started talking energetically about wanting students to show deeper comprehension and engage in meaningful conversations about books. She wanted her classroom to be a place where students read books they enjoyed and practiced how good readers think, talk, and write about their reading.

“That’s fantastic!” I said. “Our coaching goals can fit right in with your ideas. I’d love for us to launch a reading workshop in your classroom. Can we talk about how that might go?”

Teachers are more likely to engage in PD and respect others’ observation of their practice when they have some authority in determining their learning goals. Often the coach has ideas about goals, based on observations, as I did with Stephanie. I call this having a “back pocket” idea that I offer only if the teacher is having great difficulty articulating her goals. Coaches can begin to engender trust by holding initial conversations to elicit teachers’ deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning and use those beliefs as the lever to determine coaching goals. This does not mean that the coach cedes all input, rather that the coach’s job in goal setting is to search for points of agreement with the teacher and to direct her in ways likely to produce positive results.

Another component of this recommendation is recognizing that coach and teacher both bring expertise to the table. While teachers may not share the coach’s content-area expertise — although many do

Before goals, visit twice.

1. observe
2. model
3. develop ideas for coaching goals
4. expectations convo to set up regular schedule.

**Teachers' resistance to PD should come as no surprise. In many cases, teachers reasonably exhibit distrust when they view the costs of engaging in PD as outweighing the benefits.**

— respectful coaches recognize and elicit teachers' critical knowledge about their students: "Genuine conversation of this sort signals that each person's ideas have value and that the education of children requires that we work together cooperatively" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, p. 23).

The coach also needs to respect the teacher's autonomy by offering feedback only on agreed-upon goals. As tempting as it can be for coaches to identify areas for improvement, unsolicited suggestions can arouse defensiveness.

## **#2. Adopt a curious, problem-solving stance.**

Stephanie and I met to debrief the demonstration lesson I'd modeled that morning. I said, "So, our goal today was to launch reading workshop and introduce the routines we'll want your class to follow. We also wanted to see how long students read, so we could set a goal for building their stamina. What did you notice during the lesson?"

"The kids were really excited to get into the book baskets, but a bunch of them were just playing the whole time, not really reading," Stephanie replied.

"Really? Who? And what do you know about those kids? Why might they not have engaged with reading?"

"Well, Malik, Shemar, and Darrell, for sure, and Jazmin and Brianna, too. They're my lowest readers, and I think they were just flipping through books they can't really read. What do we do about that?"

"So, we need to revisit the assessment information about those students and discuss how to organize leveled books in your classroom. Then we'll plan what minilessons should come next."

The role of PD is not to fix lessons or teachers but to support teachers' abilities to meet students' needs. This view is critical to mitigating teacher resistance to feedback, which most teachers expect will be evaluative. Key is focusing on what students have learned rather than on how well or poorly a teacher has executed her lesson. Such language models a reflective stance of curiosity about instruction (Cochran-Smith

& Lytle, 1999; West & Staub, 2003). Collaboratively examining student performance can provide an effective third space for this kind of nonevaluative feedback. Coaches can frame the job of educators as continual problem solvers who recognize that surfacing dilemmas does not indicate a teacher's deficiency; it is an essential part of teaching and learning.

The coach also can create valuable opportunities to model nonevaluative feedback in debriefing her own teaching. For example, the coach might say, "Did you notice what Keshawn said during share time," instead of, "I should've done a better job asking students to explain what they learned today." In this way, the norm for feedback language gets established through discussions of the coach's rather than the teacher's practice, further diminishing possibilities for teacher defensiveness.

## **#3. Walk the walk.**

Email excerpt to Stephanie:

In our debriefing today, we discussed these next steps:

- Next week, we'll begin creating individualized book bags for each student based on the guided reading levels (attached) assessed by the reading specialist.
- I'm attaching some Level C books (for Montrice, Jazmin, Krysta, and Maurice), Level F/G (for D'Andre and Michael), and a basket of *Frog & Toad* books (for Erin, Brianna, and Deonta).
- When I return, we'll team teach the minilesson we discussed on how good readers have conversations about their books. (I will type the lesson plan.)

I also spoke to Mrs. Turner about having the French teacher dismiss your students on Thursdays so we can extend our planning time.

Coaches need to work as hard as teachers in every phase of planning, teaching, and assessment; they need to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. It is the coach's responsibility to dispel any perception that her job is easier or more relaxed than the teacher's. Coaches can do this by sharing responsibilities with teachers, including by composing lesson plans in the same format teachers are expected to use, collecting books and materials to support lessons, and assisting with assessment, grading, or other paperwork. More important, coaches should teach the same standards to the same children in the same classroom where the teacher works every day.

Another essential part of coaches' work is to plan strategically for student and teacher learning. This means explicitly considering the appropriate scaffolding to support the next layer of the teacher's progress. Then, when modeling or coteaching, coaches focus not only on the ongoing lesson but

also on opportunities for teacher growth to address during the postlesson debriefing. Additionally, as coaches manage these multiple goals, they may implicitly demonstrate that their job is not easier than that of the classroom teacher.

Coaches also walk the walk by using their access to authority in schools to advocate for teachers. They can request working conditions, such as the additional books and increased planning time I was able to procure for Stephanie, that let teachers have the time and intellectual energy to devote to coaching. Such actions may gain coaches credibility and build trust with often overburdened teachers.

#### #4. Communicate clearly and transparently.

Coaches should define expectations early on — clearly and transparently. An explicit discussion of expectations should begin during goal-setting conversations and would likely include:

- Reiterating the goals and time frame for the work;
- Establishing when, why, and how the coach will observe in the classroom;
- Discussing what nonevaluative feedback will look like and sound like; and
- Deciding with whom the coach will/won't share feedback.

Coaches must be particularly sensitive about writing down anything while visiting a classroom because many teachers associate this with evaluations, which are often viewed as reductive or dismissive of the rich complexity of their practice. One remedy is for coaches to be willing to share anything they write with the teacher. As Casey (2006) recommends, "If you don't feel comfortable showing the notes you take to the teacher, they're probably more evaluative than informative" (p. 72).

Coaches also should assume that teachers may perceive them as spies for administrators; their language can reinforce or refute that perception. When communicating with teachers, coaches should consider school culture. For example, many schools are rife with gossip. As Casey wisely notes, "As tempting as it may be to [gossip]. . . don't compromise the trust you are trying to build. If you gossip about the principal with the teachers, won't the teachers wonder if you gossip with the principal about them?" (p. 37).

Sociocultural differences in discourse also may influence the creation or erosion of trust. Oftentimes, coaches differ from teachers in one or more of the following that may affect discourse: race, ethnicity, cultural background, age, gender, educational background. Skillful coaches carefully consider the influence of these sociocultural components on discourse as they work to minimize instances of misunderstanding.

**Coaches need to work as hard as teachers in every phase of planning, teaching, and assessment; they need to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.**

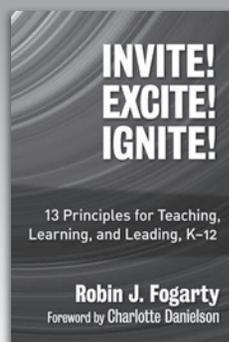
#### Conclusion

There is no standard model for preparing or supporting coaches, particularly in relational aspects of their work. The four recommendations above may contribute to developing a coach preparation model that addresses features of building trust with teach-

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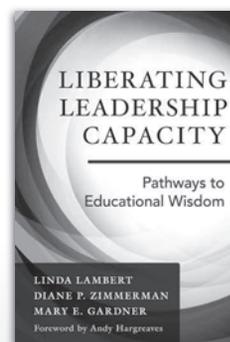
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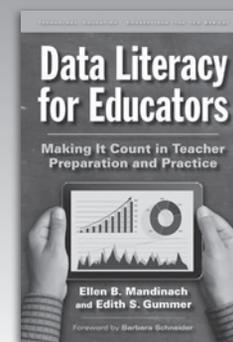
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ers. Trust is not something coaches can achieve at some magical point and then ignore; these recommendations are ongoing, recursive, and interconnected. Effective coaches attend to trust building at all times. It is essential to engaging teachers in productive learning opportunities.

At our final coaching session, as Stephanie and I revisited her goals and reflected on the changes she and her students had made, she seemed relaxed and pleased. Students were reading “just right” books, had increased their stamina, and Stephanie agreed that she now knew how to confer with readers and deliver purposeful minilessons targeted to student needs.

Next, I told Stephanie I would be sharing her progress with the principal. She became noticeably anxious. “Don’t worry,” I counseled. “I’m going to write exactly what we talked about, and I’ll cc. you.”

The next morning, I emailed a one-page memo, in fairly objective language, detailing what the principal should expect to see in Stephanie’s classroom. A few minutes later, Stephanie — who had never before responded to any of my weekly emails — wrote that she couldn’t open the attachment and asking if I could resend it. I did. This time, she wrote, “thank you. . . you are awesome!!!” When I replied, “I was simply writing the truth,” Stephanie wrote, “thank you SOOO much . . . for the truth! :-)”



“I got it from the phys ed teacher. It’s a wonderful teaching tool.”

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