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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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 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
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

**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
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, Briana, 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.

**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-
ers. Trust is not something coaches can achieve at
some magical point and then ignore; these recom-
mendations are ongoing, recursive, and intercon-
nected. 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 ex-
actly 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 be-
fore 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 teach-
ing tool.”

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