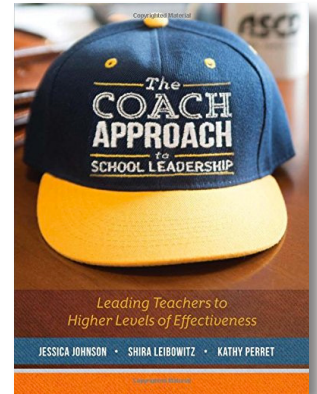


ASCD® LEADERSHIP SUMMARIES for EDUCATORS

The Coach Approach to School Leadership

Leading Teachers to Higher Levels of Effectiveness

by **Jessica Johnson, Shira Leibowitz and Kathy Perret**



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the Principal's Role

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *The Coach Approach to School Leadership*, Jessica Johnson, Shira Leibowitz and Kathy Perret address a dilemma faced by many principals: how to function as learning leaders while fulfilling their evaluative and management duties. The answer? Incorporating instructional coaching techniques as an integral part of serious school improvement.

The authors explain how principals can master the skill of “switching hats” between the nonjudgmental coach role and the evaluative supervisor role, expand their classroom visits, nurture relationships with teachers and much more. Based on the authors’ work with schools and their conversations with educators across the globe, *The Coach Approach to School Leadership* speaks to the unique needs of principals as instructional leaders, providing solutions to challenges in every aspect of this complex endeavor.

The role of the principal is changing rapidly. Let this resource guide you in improving your own practice while helping teachers master the high-quality instruction that leads to student success.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Three steps to reconcile the roles of supervisor and coach.
- Six principles that embody a power with rather than power over approach.
- To use concrete goals to structure feedback.
- Why classroom visits are essential for transforming your school into a team.



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Hero Maker: Reframing the Principal's Role

Roland Barth, founder of the Principals' Center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, is quoted as having said, "The best principals are not heroes—they are hero-makers." This humble eschewing of the title of hero in favor of a supporting role is the essence of principal-coaching.

But principals, ultimately accountable for the quality of learning in their schools, must set high professional expectations, evaluate teacher effectiveness, make budgetary decisions, allocate resources, assign teachers to classes and, at times, determine whether or not to rehire a teacher.

Principals and teachers alike may wonder, how can principals possibly coach when they must evaluate? How can teachers feel safe to experiment, take risks and reveal vulnerabilities with a person who makes important decisions about their employment? To reconcile the apparently contradictory roles of supervisor and coach, leaders must do three things:

1. Reframe the role of the principal: The varying roles of principals lie on a continuum, with judge at one end and team captain at the other. At the middle of the continuum are principals who behave primarily as coaches, carefully balancing high expectations with robust supports.

Principal-coaches see their role as learning leaders, directing resources to those areas that are most likely to affect the quality of student learning. These leaders visit classrooms and offer nonjudgmental feedback to teachers, provide time and training for teachers to work collaboratively on enhancing student learning, and creatively allocate resources in order to provide teachers with high-quality instructional coaching. While holding high expectations, principal-coaches support teachers as professionals and care about them as individuals.

Although there is no recipe for transforming one's leadership style, principals can begin to reframe their role through careful and ongoing collaboration with both supervisors and teachers and a commitment to learning a number of new coaching approaches.

2. Nurture a school-wide culture of coaching and professional collaboration. This culture involves not merely action but also interaction, not merely learning but also relationship. To nurture such a culture, principals can adjust budgets to add coaching positions, reframe existing job descriptions to include some coaching components, demonstrate their appreciation for coaching, respect the

confidentiality of coaches and teachers, and make clear that coaching is not remedial but a significant means of activating professional learning.

3. Acknowledge the vulnerability inherent in professional learning. In his 1998 book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer asserts, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." He asks, "Who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which teaching comes?"

Principal-coaching at its most powerful guides teachers to reflect on the "who" questions, opening them to their own vulnerability and potential in ways both poignant and frightening. It is this duality—inherent in great coaching and great teaching—that transforms teacher support and evaluation into a far more complex and meaningful endeavor than is typically understood.

Putting on Your Coach's Hat

The first concrete task of a principal-coach is to get out of the office and walk into classrooms. Just as a teacher spends the first few weeks of school getting to know her or his students and building classroom community, a principal taking on this new paradigm of leadership must begin developing a "classroom visitation rapport" with teachers and students.

Visiting classrooms will help you to get to know each student, become acquainted with each teacher's strengths and instructional style, learn the curriculum for each grade level and put your finger on the pulse of what is happening in the building.

Before making classroom visits a regular habit, you will need to inform teachers of your purpose for being in their classrooms. If you just enter a classroom without explanation, you will likely disrupt that class. If you simply tell your staff about your intention to come into their classrooms on a regular basis, you are bound to encounter resistance.

When you meet with teachers, explain that just as an athletic coach is invested in the success of individual players and the team as a whole, you are invested in the success of each teacher as well as the entire school. Make it clear that your goal is not to evaluate but to reflect on the teaching and learning happening in their classrooms and to offer feedback to facilitate their professional learning.

Tell teachers that they should assume that when you offer observations and feedback, you are speaking to them as a coach. Let them know that if you ever have a concern as an evaluator, you will let the teacher know that you are wearing your “evaluator’s hat” rather than your “coach’s hat.”

Principals often find that making the switch to the coach’s hat is an overwhelming experience. In the beginning, they may fear that they’ve just increased their workload from “too heavy” to “insurmountable.” Here are two of the most common objections.

Obstacle 1: “I don’t have time to do more observations than the minimum!” The problem with sticking to the minimum number of required observations is that you may not get an accurate snapshot of the teacher’s practice. When you visit classrooms frequently, you will see the good, the bad and the ugly—and you will know when you need to give feedback, when you need to give support and when you need to document your observations for dismissal.

Obstacle 2: “How can I visit classrooms when I’m always dealing with student discipline issues?”

When a teacher sends a student to the office, it is because the situation has gotten beyond his or her control. When a teacher repeatedly sends a student to your office, it is because he or she does not know what to do with that student or because what he or she is doing is not working. In these cases, teachers need your guidance on how to move forward and possibly some additional strategies to add to their toolbox.

Building Successful Coaching Relationships

On the surface, coaching conversations grapple with curriculum and pedagogic techniques, but at a deeper level, they are expressions of our core beliefs about teaching, learning, students and ourselves. Preparing your school community to embrace self-exploration through coaching will require planning, effort and ongoing reflection.

The education field is notorious for its acronyms, and here is another to add to your list: HAT. This mnemonic will help you remember the coaching mindset needed to empower and influence others.

H stands for humility. Yes, your position gives you the highest authority in the building, and you hold more degrees than some of the staff, but education is a people business. Theodore Roosevelt’s oft-cited quote “No one cares how

much you know until they know how much you care” still holds true today. Find ways to show you appreciate staff members. Get to know them and let them get to know you!

Most important, keep in mind that you are not superhuman. Today’s school leaders are often expected to do more than they are humanly capable of doing, but you aren’t going to be able to please everyone all the time. When you end up taking on or promising more than you can uphold, your relationships will suffer. Be humble in knowing that you are just one person. You don’t need to have all the answers; the answers are found within your school.

A stands for action. Principals are respected when they walk the talk and act with integrity. To gain acceptance in a coaching environment, you need to model action, even when something is out of your comfort zone. If you want teachers and students to take risks, you need to do the same. To truly understand what it is like to be coached, it’s important to accept being coached yourself. Is there another school leader in your district who could serve as your coach? Discovering firsthand the empowerment that coaching brings will provide you with valuable insight and skills for coaching others.

Finally, T stands for trust. First, trust the process of acquiring a coach’s hat. This trust is part of the process of adding coaching skills to your repertoire. Accept where you are now and continue to set goals for yourself throughout your journey.

Second, continue to build trusting relationships with the staff. Teachers will need to trust that coaching is a different process from the typical, obligatory evaluation that principals conduct. Develop the coaching process with teachers rather than just announcing that you will now be “coaching them.” Learn to navigate between your coaching role and the other aspects of your position.

Giving Feedback to Increase Effectiveness

Distinguishing feedback and evaluation is at the heart of the challenge of being a principal-coach. You cannot lead with a coach’s hat without struggling to reconcile the contradictory tasks of evaluating and coaching. Goal setting is core to leading with a coach’s hat.

When giving feedback, principal-coaches act not primarily as advisers, cheerleaders or judges but as coaches invested in helping others to articulate goals and to decide how to go about achieving those goals.

You can begin by setting your own goals and sharing them with faculty. Afterward, meet individually with all the educators you supervise, to support them in coming up with a professional learning goal, an action plan for meeting the goal, supports to use throughout the process and evidence you will use to monitor progress.

Only after setting goals and observing teachers in their classrooms can principals embark upon the vital process of giving feedback. This process actually entails substantially more listening than speaking on the part of the principal-coach, whose goal is to empower teachers to take ownership of their professional learning. There are a few practical ways to incorporate feedback into your practice, through conversations, narrative feedback and digital tools. Let's look at two of those ways in more detail.

Conversations. You can schedule formal conversations with teachers throughout the year, typically three in addition to the post-conferences held for formal evaluation: one at the beginning of the year, one during the middle of the year, and one at the end of the year. During the first conversation, set goals for the year. Midyear, reflect on progress toward goals and make any course corrections that appear to be warranted. At the end of the year, assess progress goals, celebrate successes, reflect on remaining challenges and plan for next steps.

Narrative feedback: You can formulate written narrative feedback in ways that are as low-effort as possible for principals but as high-impact as possible for teachers. An efficient, effective approach is to offer nonjudgmental prompts connected to the teacher's goal and then to remain open to teachers' reflections based on these prompts. Such prompts include "I notice. . ." "I wonder. . ." "What if. . .?" and "How might. . .?" Teachers are not required to reply to the principal but can if they choose to; the prompts are offered for teachers to use in whatever way makes the most sense to them.

Time: Managing Your Most Precious Resource

You can learn everything you want to about instructional coaching and having critical conversations with teachers, but if you can't figure out how to get out of your office, you will never be able to use your insight and expertise to foster improvement in your school. To lead as a principal-coach and help your teachers become top-notch practitioners, the key is working smarter, not harder.

It is essential that you have a reliable system to help you schedule your day's meetings, classroom visits and work tasks. In addition, you must recognize the amount of time you have and be realistic about allotting it. A calendar can help you figure out your priorities and ensure you spend your time on work that matters and that will pay off in the long run.

If you don't currently have a solid calendar system in place, then decide what you're going to use, whether it be paper, Google Calendar or another online system that your secretary will have access to. Teach your secretary how to add events to your calendar.

What does effective scheduling look like? A helpful visual draws from Stephen Covey's story about a man trying to fit rocks, gravel and sand into a jar. The only way he could fit all three was to put in the big rocks first, then put in the gravel and finally pour in the sand to fill the spaces in between. The lesson here is that if the big rocks don't go in first, they won't fit at all.

The first step in creating a calendar is to determine the non-negotiables that must be included before other, lesser duties. To be an effective learning leader, you've got to prioritize coaching as one of the biggest rocks.

Once you've entered your big rocks and required meetings, keep adding to the calendar and tweaking as needed throughout the year; you can even color-code it (e.g., coloring classroom time red to signal its importance). Set aside five minutes at the end of each day and 15 minutes at the end of each week to review your progress. Is your calendar aligned with your priorities? What's getting in your way? How can you plan accordingly?

Enlist your secretary or office assistant to help manage your calendar and make your staff aware of this scheduling process. Giving the secretary access to your calendar ensures that he or she knows where you are throughout the day and is able to schedule appointments for you with any teachers or parents who request them. The secretary doesn't need to ask if you can meet with Mrs. Smith tomorrow, because he or she can already see on your calendar that you're free during Mrs. Smith's prep time.

Use a tool or app for your never-ending to-do list. Consider a "Tasks" or "To Do" calendar in Google Calendar (making sure to use the reminders feature), Remember the Milk, Todoist, Toodledo or Omnifocus. Feel free to research other options that work better for you.

Transforming Your School into a Team

Transforming teaching from an individual race into a team sport is arguably the single most important goal for principal-coaches. Yet even school leaders who are extraordinarily skilled in coaching teachers often struggle with this goal.

“Get out of your office and into classrooms” is essential yet ultimately insufficient. An equally important call to action is “Get your teachers out of their own classrooms and into the classrooms of their colleagues.” When principal-coaches empower teachers to use instructional coaching techniques to support one another, they inspire their school to evolve from a collection of independent practitioners into a high-functioning, cohesive team. This shift, arguably more than any other, has the potential to transform schools.

There are four basic approaches to teacher classroom visits that help teachers get acclimated to and comfortable with the process: visiting other schools, beginning with a small number of interested teachers, beginning with one grade-level team or department, and school-wide implementation with preparation.

There is no proven recipe for structuring classroom visits. There are, however, a range of options that can be adapted to meet teachers’ and schools’ specific needs. These include peer coaching, in which teachers use techniques of instructional coaches to support one another; instructional rounds or learning walks, in which groups of teachers visit classrooms, reflect together on what they have observed and design a plan of action based on their findings; and lesson study, in which teachers create a lesson together, observe as one of them teaches the lesson, and then reflect on the

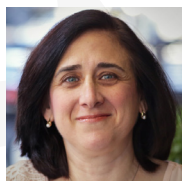
lesson with the goal of improving their craft.

All of these structures ask participants to

- Determine a problem or question of practice related to teaching and learning that is directly observable, is actionable, connects to a broader strategy of improvement, and has the potential to have a significant effect on student learning.
- Observe and gather evidence related to the problem or question of practice through such activities as examining student work samples, conducting interviews with students and with teachers, creating lesson plans, visiting classrooms and analyzing video recordings of classrooms.
- Reflect on the evidence gathered and determine action steps accordingly.

The true impact of principal-coaching occurs once principals can turn their attention from coaching individuals to nurturing a team of professionals who have the maturity and skill to blend professional autonomy with a commitment to professional collaboration.

Getting to this place of creative collaboration and coordinated teamwork occurs gradually, over the course of years. It is the single most powerful contribution to improving the quality of teaching and learning for our students, and it is the aspiration for all school leaders who truly seek to lead with a coach’s hat.



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