



## WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Kay Psencik

# COACHING PRINCIPALS IS A CALLING AND A COMMITMENT

**P**rincipals are smart, accomplished leaders. They want their students to be successful and have a deep moral internal drive to educate all students to high standards. But principals have complex jobs that get more complex every year.

In today's environment, workforce skills, community involvement skills, communication skills, and technology skills have become essential alongside high levels of mathematics understanding and other aspects of instructional leadership. With these many demands, principals need high-quality support and professional learning communities just like teachers but have far less access to them. Professional learning for principals still tends to be episodic and lack coherence (Southern Regional Education Board, 2010; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Principal coaching is an important approach for changing that pattern. Coaching is strategic, ongoing, and personalized. It fosters just-in-time principal learning. When principals are coached well, they have a nonevaluative thought partner who assists them in working on issues specific to them and their schools. This changes principals' attitudes and practices so they can see new opportunities for themselves and those they serve.

Coaching principals is a unique role. It is not facilitation, mentoring, or modeling. It involves the powerful skill of becoming a sincere thought partner with the coachee. Coaching principals is a calling and a commitment. It's a calling because it is humbling and other-centered. It's a commitment because seeing new practices emerge in principals takes time.

I have coached hundreds of principals from upstate New York to Fort Wayne, Indiana, to Galveston County, Texas. Here are some of the lessons I have learned.

### TRUST HOLDS RELATIONSHIPS TOGETHER.

Coaches must build trust in all directions. This includes, of course, with principal coachees. When principals do not trust their coach's competence or willingness to maintain confidentiality, they are not open or willing to really problem solve issues that are barriers to their school's success.

In addition, coaches must build trust with district leaders by keeping them informed. When district leaders grow uncomfortable with principal coaches, they see no value in their work and easily dismiss them.

This can be a tricky balance. Not long ago, a principal shared with me a concern about a high school American history team that was not working well together. She knew she was accountable



**Kay Psencik**  
([kay.psencik@learningforward.org](mailto:kay.psencik@learningforward.org)) is a senior consultant at Learning Forward.

for better student performance in these classes, but she was making no strides with the team. As I explored the real issues, the principal finally shared her struggles with a male social studies department leader who really wanted her job and blocked everything she tried to do to move the team.

To build trust in this situation, I worked with the principal to create new strategies to build a relationship with this department leader, helped her establish a short-term goal, and most importantly, maintained confidentiality. I knew there was no need to discuss this situation with the principal's supervisor, her peers, or her district leaders.

Sometimes, there is an expectation or a need for coaches to keep district leaders informed about the work with principals. In this case, I could have told the leadership something like, "She is working on a great, challenging goal, and she is eager to share it with you when she has found a solution."

Sometimes I choose to coach the principals about how to have a productive conversation with their supervisors. But I put the choice of disclosing the problem in the hands of the principal.

Coaching shouldn't be about the coach. It is about the principal. Being other-centered means not taking center stage, not sharing her story, and not robbing the coachee of the opportunity to create her own future.

## **LISTENING AND QUESTIONING ARE ESSENTIAL SKILLS.**

The essential skills of a coach are so easily said but so difficult to do. This is especially true of listening. Listening is about asking questions, not giving answers. A coach's role is not to tell principals what they would do, not to give them advice, not to share stories, not to commiserate. The key to success is listening from the coachee's point of view and assisting them to stay focused

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on their own learning.

In a professional learning session for principals a few years ago, I offered an hour of coaching to all principals in the session. They signed up for every hour over three days, six hours a day. I coached either individually or in small teams every hour.

Over the three days, I had asked lots of questions, and my last group was a small group of new principals. They were asking me simple questions about how to meet their staffs for the first time, how to organize their first parent meetings, how to make sure students get to know them. In my tired state of mind, I gave in to making suggestions and I forgot all about coaching. It did not take me long to remember why listening and questioning are the essential skills of coaches. Every suggestion I made was met with, "Well, I am not sure that will work in my school because ..." or "I know some of the teachers on my staff already, and I am not willing to go there yet."

The effective principal coach knows the answers are within the principal and that, through intense listening and honest exploratory questioning, the principal will come to his or her own solutions. When questions stimulate thought and innovation, principals have space to create their own new and innovative ideas and solutions. Only when the coach is willing to be patient and let the learner do the learning do principals grow more confident in

themselves and commit to different approaches.

## **STAYING FOCUSED LEADS TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.**

Principals often stray from their core work — ensuring students and staff are learning — in part because they know that other issues, such as the mismanagement of the buildings or their budgets, or out-of-control students and parents, could get them in real trouble with their supervisors. The challenge is for the coach to assist the principal to stay focused on the core work of instructional leadership.

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders can help the coach and coachee stay focused on this goals (NPBEA, 2015). In particular, Standard 4 states that effective principals lead curriculum, assessment, and instruction, and Standard 6 states that effective principals ensure that educators are increasing their effectiveness every day.

When coaches keep principals focused on these two areas, they have a much stronger opportunity to accelerate principals' learning. Each standard has precise descriptors that assist principals in assessing their strengths and setting their goals.

Wise coaches keep principals focused on how student and staff performance inform their own learning needs, by analyzing student and staff data and discussing classroom observation and walk-through data as well as observations of teachers' learning communities.

As the principal learning goal is set, the coach facilitates the principal coachee through a cycle of continuous improvement. As the coach moves the principal from setting goals, to exploring new leadership skills, to setting a plan and implementing it, to reflecting and monitoring their own progress, the principal develops

competence and confidence in the leadership areas that matter the most.

Throughout this process, the coach may have to help the principal stay focused on the goals. Principals are so focused on the learning of everyone around them that, when working with them, coaches may find themselves saying often, “No, remember, this is not about goals others achieve. This is your learning goal. As you learn your new strategies, you become more effective in helping teaching teams achieve their goals.”

### CONNECTION IS KEY.

Since principals are ultimately responsible for the success of all, they often feel alone. Learning Forward has run several networks for principal learning (e.g. Arizona Learning Leaders for Learning Schools initiative, Galveston County Learning Leaders Learning Communities in Texas, and

Twin Tiers Principals Coalition in Corning, New York), and we have heard over and over that the most valuable gift the facilitators gave them was the gift of their community.

This kind of connection is essential, whether it comes from a network or an individual coaching relationship. Coaches should help principals feel well-held. In *The Coach's Craft*, I reference the story about my grandmother and how as a child I loved having her hold my hands in hers (Psencik, 2011). I was fascinated by her hands. She was a gardener, so her hands were always picking vegetables, shelling peas, canning peaches.

Her hands were unbelievably soft and, when I held them, I felt safe. There was comfort there, and energy. Great coaching is like those hands — quietly comforting, caring, and patient, yet inspiring and energizing. When we support others and encourage, inspire,

and challenge them, we assist those who are angry, challenged, frustrated, resigned, and resentful to find audacious hope. There is no better gift.

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