

How Might a Coach Respond?

While facilitating a group of coaches, I explored the role of using empathy statements and supporting statements to respond to teacher statements that coaches might describe as “challenging.”

Teacher: “The district has given us a new curriculum which causes a great increase in planning time on our part and now we have to attend these cross-grade level meetings taking more of our time.”

Too often I find coaches responding to a statement like this by taking responsibility or by being defensive.

Coach: “I’ll see if I can shorten the meeting.” (*responsible for the problem*)

Coach: “The curriculum office is requiring every school to hold these meetings.” (*defensive*)

Empathy statements begin by recognizing an emotion that you believe is present and then pointing to future or past success, or pointing in a different direction. Frequently my empathy statement is preceded by a paraphrase that identifies the emotion.

Teacher: “The district has given us a new curriculum which causes a great increase in planning time on our part and now we have to attend these cross-grade level meetings taking more of our time.”

Coach: “You are feeling time pressures building increased stress.” (*confirmatory paraphrase*)

Teacher: “A ton.”

Coach: “A new curriculum does put planning and time demands on already stressed teachers’ schedules. I am hopeful that our

cross-grade level planning leads to greater student success which will reward us all.” (*Empathy Statement-future success*)

Or

Coach: “It is a harried time for many teachers. What have you seen in the new curriculum that will be most helpful to your students?” (*Empathy Statement -alternative direction*)

Supporting statements differ from empathy statements in that they respond to what the teacher said or is thinking compared to the empathy statement which responded to feelings or emotions.

The first part of the supporting statement shares the strongest reinforcement that you can honestly provide. The second part either shows full agreement (those are easy ☐) or adds some limits to the acceptance or supports something else.

Teacher: “The district has given us a new curriculum which causes a great increase in planning time on our part and now we have to attend these cross-grade level meetings taking more of our time.”

Coach: “A new curriculum certainly adds to teachers’ planning time. Hopefully, the insights and understanding of cross-grade level teachers can increase our success matching planning to student needs.” (*supporting statement*)

Or

“Meetings sure do eat uptime. What outcome from the meeting would make you think the time was well spent?” (*supporting statement*)

When using supporting statements or empathy statements, I find it best to slow down my pace. It’s important that my voice and body language communicate that I am listening to what was shared and am being empathetic and supportive. The more you are feeling defensive, the more important it is to slow the

pace. You want your response to be thoughtful and reflective. Another caution is to avoid using words like “but or however” as connectors between the two sentences in the statements. Your first statement communicates acceptance or support. When you follow that with a “but” it negates what was said. (That’s a good idea but.....) Not only does “but” negate the support – it also signals me to ready my rebuttal to the second part. It is the second part of these statements that you want people to consider. The support and empathy in the first part, along with your tone and body language, set the environment for the second part to be heard and considered.

Time is important. If you receive another challenging response to your empathy or support statement, listen, confirm, and ask to gain more understanding. Avoid problem-solving responsibility.

Here is another statement from a teacher that one of the coaches shared; “I’ve tried every strategy, and nothing works. These kids just can’t do it.”

I might approach this challenging statement like this: [Note that the teacher’s response at any point could switch directions]

“Sounds like you have invested a lot in supporting learning.”
(*confirmatory paraphrase*)

“You’re disappointed that your efforts haven’t gotten a better return in learning.” (*confirmatory paraphrase*)

“Students’ lack of success is worrying and stressful. Not knowing what to try next can be scary. What do you think you have learned about what doesn’t work?” (*empathy statement*)

“You are working very hard. How much effort would you say students are investing?” (*supporting statement*)

“I am wondering if it would be valuable for me to observe

students in an upcoming learning activity. You could describe the student engagement/effort you seek, and I could collect what I see individual students doing. I am thinking that might give us a starting point for a possible next step. What do you think?"

Real-time observation should strengthen the communication between teacher and coach as you move forward.

Drop me a note (sbarkley@pls3rdlearning.com) if you'd like to explore a statement you find challenging.