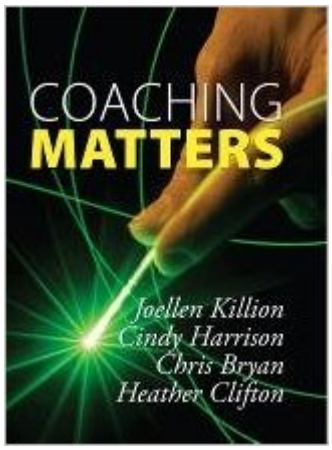
Build the Instructional Coach-Principal Partnership During the Summer Months

The alignment of an instructional coach's and principal's messages to staff is important in maintaining teacher actions what will drive increased student learning. Both principal and coach must make constant decisions and responses to staff during busy school days throughout the year. Rich conversations assist principal and coach in knowing their thinking is based on agreed upon goals and priorities.

Sebastian Wren and Diana Vallejo writing in ***Effective Collaboration Between Instructional Coaches and Principals***, identify several critical elements for successful instructional coaching initiatives, including the coach-principal partnership.

"The instructional coaching model has tremendous potential, both good and bad. Instructional coaches can be the wind in the sails of a struggling school or they can be the anchor. There is growing evidence that instructional coaches can be a driving positive force in a school, but only if certain conditions are met…

…there is one critical topic that is only beginning to get long-needed attention in the instructional coach literature—the placement of the instructional coach within the school and the working relationship the coach should have with the principal and other administrators within the school."



In Coaching Matters, Joellen Killion and others provide suggestions and examples that can assist in developing a written coach-principal agreement.

It is critical that coach and principal function as a team and are seen by staff as being "on the same page." A teacher should discover that as she implements changes discussed with a coach, her principal notices and reinforces those efforts. It should be obvious to the staff that issues addressed in their faculty meetings align with topics of PLC and coaching conversations sparked by the coach. This does not mean there isn't confidentiality in coaching conversations. It means the common focus on student achievement and the thoughts about the necessary student behaviors to produce that achievement are in place.

Scheduling the time, especially uninterrupted, for the necessary coach/principal conversations is often difficult. Summer may provide the perfect opportunity for the instructional coach to call the principal and request a coffee hour to catch up and/or establish a plan for the start of the new year. Here are some questions that a coach might use in such a dialogue with consideration to varying partnership situations. (Mix and match as appropriate)

Situation 1 – Coach and principal both returning, having worked together last year.

- What do you identify as our greatest success last year in student learning?

- What did you notice in classroom observations that would have led you to predict that success?
- What do you see as our focus for student growth this year?
- What changes will teachers need to make to gain the student behaviors we need?
- What would you see and hear students doing that would tell you the teacher changes are in place?
- How would my work support the changes we need?
- What do you believe you will need to do?
- How should we plan to communicate the plan to the staff?

Situation 2 – Principal returning and coach is new to the school.

- What are some of the strongest student achievement results the school is getting?
- What do you believe are the staff efforts that are getting those results?
- Where are you envisioning the next desired increase in student achievement?
- What will you need to get students to do to reach that result?
- What will that require teachers to do?
- How should I begin my work to support those efforts?

Situation 3 – Coach returning and the principal is new.

- What have your experiences been coaching, being coached and working with school based coaches?
- How does the role of a coach fit into promoting the school culture you will want to develop?
- What questions do you have for me?
- How can my work assist you as you begin knowing and guiding student achievement success?

Situation 4 – Coach and principal are new to the school.

- What have your experiences been coaching, being coached and working with school based coaches?
- How does the role of a coach fit into promoting the school culture you will want to develop?
- What do you know about the school that will focus our beginning work?
- What do we need to find out?
- What are some of the initial impressions and messages you want the staff to receive?
- How can I best support the start of that work?

If you are a principal and your coach doesn’t request a summer conversation, consider sending an invitation. Then forward this article. I believe there is real value in the coach hearing your responses. I’d love to hear the experiences of anyone experimenting with these questions. Good luck in building your partnerships.