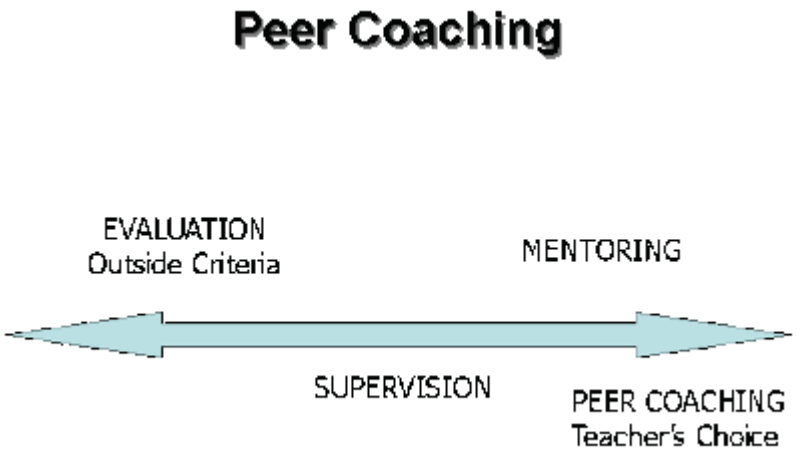
Partnership Principles and Coaching

While presenting at the National Staff Development Council's Summer Conference, I had the opportunity to attend a research presentation by Dr. Jim Knight, from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Teaching and Learning. Jim is doing important research documenting the impact of coaching on teacher change. In his presentation, Jim shared the principals of partnership which I found to be important in coaching relationships.

The Principals of Partnership approach to staff development: (see my connections to coaching following each section)

Equality
Partnership involves relationships between equals. Thus, each person's thoughts and beliefs are held to be valuable, and, although each individual is different, no individual decides for another. When this principle is applied to staff development, it means that all participants in a learning session are recognized as equal partners, and consequently no one's view is more important or valuable than any one else's.

(In my coaching training I use a continuum that moves from evaluation to supervision to mentoring to coaching. Equality of positions is found at the coaching end. Thus at times, a principal can be a teacher's coach when both recognize that is the relationship for that moment. A principal knows that teachers are at this point when the teacher thanks the principal for a suggestion he made and then informs him that she will look for a different option.)



Choice

In a partnership, one individual does not make decisions for another. Because partners are equal, they make their own individual choices and make decisions collaboratively. When this principle is applied to staff development, it means that participant choice is implicit in every communication of content and, to the greatest extent possible, the process used to learn the content.

(Choice appears in coaching when the coach follows the agenda of the teacher. I describe that the ideal coach stops outside the door of a classroom and hangs her agenda on a hook, puts on the agenda of the teacher and enters. In peer coaching, a teacher chooses the coach, the focus of the coaching, and the time and place of coaching.)

Voice

Partnership is multivocal rather than univocal, and all individuals in a partnership require opportunities to express their point of view. Indeed, a primary benefit of a partnership is that each individual has access to a multiplicity of perspectives rather than the singular perspective of the patriarch. When this principle is applied to staff development, it means that all participants in a learning session have the freedom to express their opinions

about content being covered. Furthermore, since opinions will inevitably vary, staff developers should encourage conversation that allows people the freedom to express a variety of opinions

(Again, as you move on the continuum from evaluation to coaching the teacher's voice increases. Evaluators report out and teachers listen…. Coaches ask and teachers talk.)

Reflection
Offering workshop participants the freedom to consider ideas before adopting them is central to the principle of reflection within Partnership Learning. Indeed, reflective thinkers by definition have to be free to choose or reject ideas, or they simply are not thinkers at all. Reflection holds the potential of providing an opportunity for teachers to think about what Parker Palmer calls the "inner landscape of the teaching self." Reflection can enable teachers to ask profound questions about what, how, why and who teaches.

(Coaches support reflection. Questioning is one of the most important skills that coaches practice and develop. To see Empowering Questions for Coaches, please email me at sbarkley@plsweb.com.)

Dialogue
To arrive at mutually acceptable decisions, partners engage in dialogue. In a partnership, one individual does not impose, dominate, or control. Partners engage in conversation, learning together as they explore ideas. When this principle is applied to staff development, it means that staff developers embrace dialogue rather than lecture. Facilitators avoid manipulation, engage participants in conversation about content, and think and learn with participants as everyone moves through content being discussed.

(Conversation is a key reward for teachers who engage in coaching. When doing initial peer coaching training for a

staff, one of the comments I often get after the first practice session with conferences is a teacher saying," Someone just listened to me talk about my classroom for 7 minutes… I don't know if that ever happened before." Listen is critical to dialogue.)

Praxis
The purpose of partnership is to enable individuals to have more meaningful experiences. In partnership relationships, meaning arises when people reflect on ideas and then put those actions into practice. A requirement for partnership is that each individual is free to reconstruct and use content the way he or she considers it most useful. When this principle is applied to staff development, it means that facilitators offer numerous opportunities for participants to reflect on the practical implications of new content being learned.

(I stress that coaching builds teacher creativity. The dialogue, reflections and observations of another person in a classroom often taps NEW ideas and courage. Coaching often increases teacher risk taking which leads to new learning for the teacher, the coach and most importantly the student.)

"Coaching is a relationship between two equals, one of whom is committed to making personal and professional improvements. These improvements may come in the form of wanting to learn new strategies, to get unblocked or unstuck, to reevaluate beliefs or values affecting professional outlook. It could be to look at habits or change strategies. Whatever it is, the person being coaches– the coachee– takes ownership of his or her own improvement. Therein lies its power."
Quality Teaching in a Culture of Coaching