A Mental Model for Resistance in Coaching

Over the past two weeks I had two training sessions for new coaches. Both were multiple days and near the end the participants wanted to explore strategies and verbal responses for working in difficult situations. After several role-playing activities where I modeled possible coaching responses, I summarized my thought process while listening to resistance and deciding my reply. I identified three perspectives that appear fairly constant for me.

 # 1 Approach the conversation with an assumption that the teacher has a more positive and deeper commitment to the well-being of students than is evident in his words or actions.

This allows me to listen for an inkling of a positive belief and then state it back to the teacher as a paraphrase:

Teacher is complaining about students not doing homework or studying.

Paraphrase: It's important to you that your students are successful as learners.

Teacher says she doesn't have time for PLC and coaching activities, papers to grade and planning to do.

Paraphrase: You work very hard for your students.

The opportunity to get such a positive statement into the conversation often triggers a teacher to reveal a commitment to learners that creates a starting point for exploring an idea for change.

#2 Avoid a pull to take the teacher's problem as your own.

I describe people coming to the coach with a problem …a "monkey on their back". Coaches need to be monkey tamers but not monkey collectors. When the teacher leaves, the problem (monkey) goes with her.

This allows the coach to facilitate the teacher's problem solving thinking without an emotional pull that comes with owning the problem….hence being more valuable to the teachers.

Teacher: I really can't provide for all the levels of reading abilities in my class.

Coach: You want to provide something for your students that they are not getting now.

Coach: If there was a way, what would you want them to get?
Now that the teacher has described the students' need the coaching partnership can examine possible ways to have it happen. Conversation is being driven by what the teacher wants for students rather than by what the coach suggest the teacher "needs" to do. The teacher leaves, maybe with the coach coming to model a strategy, but it is clear the teacher owns the need for something to be different.

#3 Explain…do not defend.

When a teacher negatively challenges a district program, or a decision of the principal, or even the coach's qualifications for her role, a defensive response only tends to heighten the resistance. I suggest the coach take what I call an "aggressive step backwards." I will step back, give some room, broaden my stance (firm) and explain.

Teacher: It's ridiculous to do all this formative assessment and then need to share the results in PLCs.
Coach: It is a lot of work. When the PLCs regroup students to provide instruction to immediately address missing skills, student achievement increases dramatically.
Teacher: I think putting coaches into classrooms and lowering class size would be a better use of the districts limited funds.
Coach: Many administrators and boards of education are struggling with that question. As a district instructional coach, I am focused on assisting teachers to get the student behaviors/actions that will produce achievement.
Change comes from teacher reflection. These three strategies help me get to the reflection sooner than any "speech" and, therefore, the teacher focused on teaching and learning.