Coaching and Expertise

In a recent article, The Learning Zone / Should Coaches Be Experts?, Jim Knight explores the question, "Do coaches need to be experts to have the biggest impact?" Jim shares, "When coaches position themselves as experts giving advice, they often overestimate the value of their advice, and turn off the people they coach by trying to solve their problems for them." He points to advice from Michael Bungay Stanier, "Tell less, ask more. Your advice is not as good as you think it is".

In the video, Do I need to be an expert to be a coach?, Nick Bosk presents a visual for understanding the coach's role. He describes the client as the person in the driver's seat of a car and the coach in the passenger's seat. Coaching too strongly as an expert would be like grabbing the steering wheel. Not an effective approach. The coach may have strategies and information the client can use but the client needs to stay in control of the steering wheel.

In a podcast that I recorded with Joellen Killion, she described different mental models that coaches might operate under head, heart, and hand. She describes the "hand" approach as a mental model where the coach embraces action. "The more I do, the more that will support the teacher." This coach may be very active in providing resources, modeling, demonstrating, giving the teacher things, providing examples, "Let me show you. Let me lead you in this process. Let me tell you the way to do this so that you are able to follow all my actions." Very often the coach is doing most of the work. The problem arises because the more the coach does, the more the teacher sees how difficult the work is, how complex the work is. This

can interfere with the teacher's ability to have any sense of confidence or competence to be able to pick up those practices. So, when coaches operate from that hand model, they are usurping the role and responsibility of the teacher to be engaged in the change. "So, when the coach does more and the teacher does less, it creates a situation where both the coach and the teacher are paralyzed in action." In Bosk's visual, the coach has grabbed the steering wheel.

One strategy that I have proposed is for the coach to uncover the role the teacher wants the coach to play at the current time, along a continuum from expert to what I call eyes and ears.

Expert **Eyes/Ears**

Expert Eyes and Ears

At the eyes and ears spot, the teacher is seeking an observer to collect data that the teacher will process for meaning. In this case, anyone can do the observation, even if they are unsure of what to conclude or how to generate a change should the teacher desire. An example could be tracking student voices in a lesson. Who spoke? Did they answer a question or ask a question? The teacher will interpret the data herself.

At the other end of the continuum, a teacher requests a coach who has expertise, perhaps in a particular content delivery or strategy. In this case, the expert coach chooses what to pay attention to and directs the teacher in the next best steps. After teaching middle grades for five years, I became a first-grade teacher. I didn't have enough knowledge of teaching beginning reading to request a focus for observation. I needed my coach, with reading expertise, to direct my learning and practice.

In the middle of this continuum coach and teacher are

partnering in deciding the focus of an observation, the interpretation of the observation data, and the formation of next steps. An example might be a teacher's concern for the engagement of English Language Learners during science lab activities. Teacher and coach might decide upon having several observations recording the actions of the ELL students and other learners. Then meet to explore that data together and perhaps decide upon further, more focused observations or generate strategies (teacher actions) to implement and observe for impact.

Trust is built as the coach stays in the role agreed upon in the pre-conference. Sharing expertise feedback that wasn't requested is likely to be interpreted by the teacher as evaluation. Equally, a coach withholding helpful knowledge wanting a teacher to "figure it out," when the teacher desires the information, raises frustration. Trust requires coaches doing what they agreed in the pre-conference they were going to do.

The key then is in developing my coaching expertise. Kathleen Cushman identifies The Habits of Experts, from fabric art to medicine.

- Ask good questions.
- Break problems into parts.
- Look for patterns.
- Rely on evidence.
- Consider other perspectives.
- Follow hunches.
- Use familiar ideas in new ways.
- Collaborate with others.
- Welcome critique.
- Revise repeatedly.

- Persist.
- Seek new challenges.
- Know yourself.

I think Cushman’s list is great for a coach’s self-reflection.