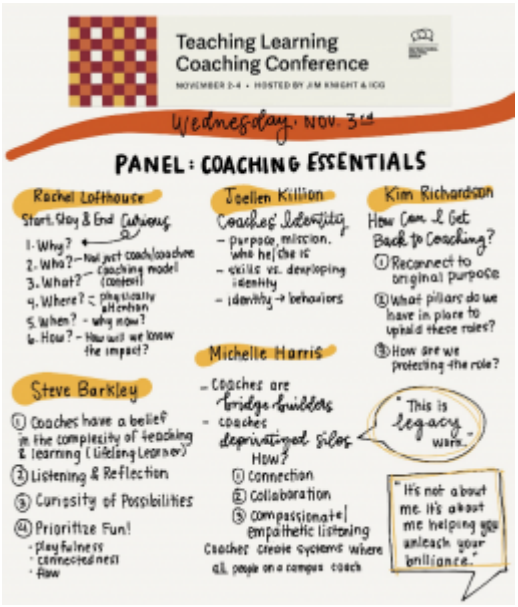
Some Essentials of Coaching



As part of Jim Knight's Teaching Learning Coaching Conference, I had the opportunity to participate in a panel discussion with Rachel Lofthouse, Joellen Killion, Kim Richardson, and Michelle Harris. Jim had asked us to share what we thought were some essentials of coaching. There were several areas where our comments matched quite closely. Each panelist also highlighted some additional elements for me to consider.

Whitney Johnson shared this visual summary on Twitter, @LearnwithMrsJ.

Here is the thinking that I shared during the panel session.

A belief in the complexity of teaching and learning.

When a coach appreciates the complexity of teaching and learning, the stage is set for a partnership exploration with the teacher one is coaching. Respect for the teacher comes through the coaching conversation. There is no easy fix to a problem the teacher might present or an opportunity the teacher wishes to explore. I describe that if I placed everything I know about teaching and learning inside of a balloon, the outside of the balloon represents the area for further study. The more I learn the more I can learn.

In an earlier blog on exploring complexity, I wrote, "When we appreciate the complexity of teaching and learning, seeking observation and reflections from colleagues is a natural expectation for teachers. Educators deserve coaching and PLC teaming support. It's why I have stated across my coaching

career that the most professional teachers, like professional athletes and performing artists, deserve the most coaching. They are working, designing, creating, and performing at the most complex level. Appreciating complexity should fuel coaching cultures in our schools."

A Focus on Listening and Reflection

Listening and generating reflection is what creates empowerment in coaching. It is why I describe the preconference as the most important component in a coaching cycle. Listening communicates that the teacher's agenda is driving the process. A favorite example emerges for me when I ask for a volunteer in a workshop session, in advance, to model a pre-conference with me. Frequently, they will email me asking if I can send them the questions I'll be using. When I share that I can't, I ask if they know why. They usually respond no and are surprised when I explain that I don't know what questions I'll be asking until I hear their initial response.

This quote from Adam Grant in Think Again illustrates, "The power of listening doesn't lie just in giving people the space to reflect on their views. It's a display of respect and an expression of care. Listening is a way of offering others our scarcest, most precious gift: our attention. Listening well is more than a matter of talking less. It's a set of skills in asking and responding."

Tapping Curiosity

Curiosity is a resource for the coach and the coachee. Ines Paler in Coach like a child – The Power of Curiosity shares:

"For a coach, being curious enables us to let go of our beliefs. It allows us to leap beyond first impressions and to connect with the client. It doesn't matter if their story is like ours because it's not the story that matters. It's what

the person is experiencing. And that is unique."

Similarly, curiosity on teachers' part either individually or within their teams and PLCs can generate direction and hope which are needed as we work to create maximum learning opportunities for students at a time with many uncertainties.

"Being curious will empower us to reframe situations, to see new options and alternatives. That curiosity will enable us to find new colours and textures in the box we have. Imagine what will happen when you remove all rules and restrictions we take for granted. When you just play with the situation and discover what's possible. Indeed, only such curiosity can bring us both the hope and the powerful creativity to live the life we want to live." (Paler)

Plan for Fun

This is a new conscious focus for me. This new focus has me exploring "restorative rest." Many folks are reporting that in the past when they were fatigued on Friday, a weekend of laying back, extra sleep, maybe a walk, or playing with the kids allowed a return to school on Monday with renewed energy. That isn't happening for them now. While that rest is needed, an examination of "what I'm doing at work" might be needed as well. In an earlier blog, I examined the role of fun and its benefits for health, creativity, and productivity. Might planning for more fun in teaching and learning be a key against fatigue?

In a blog post on restorative rest, Emily Whitten shares some questions that I think coaches might use with teachers.

"Every so often—mid-project, mid-year, or even mid-week—create moments of pause to ask yourself and your team questions like:

> Are we spending energy on what matters?
>
> Do we have the same goal as when we started?

Are our efforts working in getting us to that goal?

What's going well that we should be doing more of?

What should we be doing differently?"

I really like that first question! Energy being spent on things that I feel don't matter is sure to produce fatigue. Finding fun in teaching and learning can generate energy. A worthy topic for coaching exploration.

Taking part in TLC21, interacting with Jim Knight and others on the panel was definitely energy-generating for me.

Here is another visual summary from Dana Landenburger, @dlandenburger on Twitter.

Tapping Your Curiosity While Coaching: Lessons from the late Larry King

The recent passing of Larry King, the renowned CNN interviewer caused me to reconnect with a message I pulled from an article I read years ago that was exploring King's success. The first part of the article asked other interviewers what they felt was his key strategy.

The common thread they shared was that King did not go into his interviews with a fixed set of questions. He didn't set out to back the interviewee into a corner. They described instead, that he had open questions and showed interest that lead to the interviewee sharing information that they hadn't planned on sharing on live TV. Here are some examples:

- Vice President Dan Quayle told King in 1992 that he would support his daughter if she made the decision to have an abortion.
- Texas oilman H. Ross Perot confided in King that he was considering an independent run for president in 1992.
- Marlon Brando got so comfortable he kissed King on the mouth as they finished their televised interview at Brando's house.

In King's own words, "I don't have an agenda. I don't assume the answer. I never learned anything when I was talking. Listening is as important" (Source: San Diego Union-Tribune)

Wendy Walker, King's producer for thirty years reported that he kept his questions short and let his guests do most of the talking. When he did an interview, he made it all about the other person. He never said, 'Me, too'.

From very early in my work as a consultant to coaches, I have been asked for a list of questions for pre and post-conferencing and have done my best to avoid providing one. A pre-conference for an evaluation observation can be sent to the teacher in advance as it is made up of the questions that request information the evaluator has decided is important. In coaching, you are seeking the coachee's agenda which means your questions come from your listening. Quality listening requires being confident enough in your skills to not feel

pressure to be forming your next question when you should be listening. Feeling comfortable with a pause as you form a question when the coachee has stopped talking is also important.

In the second part of the article that I read years back, they asked Larry King why he thought he was successful. His answer was, “Curiosity.” He continued, “Curiosity didn’t kill this cat. It made him wealthy!” He shared that he was interested in the story he was hearing. The interviewee responded positively to his curiosity and interest. King has been described as ‘an endearing, occasionally irksome, child who is constantly asking questions.’

When I read about his curiosity, I realized that it was a key to my success as a coach and I encouraged others to consider tapping into curiosity as a key element of their coaching conferencing. As I listen to a teacher describe the learning that she wants to generate and the hypotheses about ways to make that happen I am intrigued. The complexity of the teaching/learning process is amazing. The possibilities are near endless. The student reaction (engagement) often is unpredictable. Reflecting in a post conference about what did happen and what insights are gained and how to proceed continues to captivate my thinking.

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> *“For a coach, being curious enables us to let go of our beliefs. It allows us to leap beyond first impressions and to connect with the client. It doesn’t matter if their story is like ours because it’s not the story that matters. It’s what the person is experiencing. And that is unique.”*

I especially encourage new coaches who are unsure of their coaching skills to allow their curiosity to guide them and the teachers they are supporting. Avoid the urge to be an expert, a problem solver, and to give the teacher a solution.

Paler suggests we play with the situation and discover what’s possible. Curiosity can bring us both hope and powerful creativity.

I wish you the pleasure that emerges from engaging in collaborative curiosity around teaching and learning with your colleagues.