Podcast: Healthy Relationships Between the Instructional Coach and the Principal

Lindsay Deacon, a co-author of "**The Educoach Survival Guide,**" explores the relationship elements of coaching. How do the coach and the principal build a trusting relationship? How do coach and principal support each other's relationships with teachers? Lindsay shares the value of starting the year listening and looking like a scientist.

Visit the Educoach Survival Guide website.
Find Lindsay on Twitter: @TheRealLindsay2

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT
Steve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello, and welcome to the Steve Barkley,

ponders out loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening. I'm thrilled you're here.

Steve: 00:32 Healthy relationships between the instructional coach and the principal. I'm recording the podcast today at the Instructional Coaches Conference from Region 13 in Austin, Texas. I had the opportunity to attend a session by Lindsay Deacon, the co-author of the book, "The Educoach Survival Guide." Her session was titled, "Partnering With the Principal – Healthy Relationships Between the Coach and the Principal." And as soon as I got halfway through her session, I walked up and invited her to join me for a podcast. So welcome Lindsay.

Lindsay: 01:13 Hi, thank you for having me.

Steve: 01:16 Lindsay, I'm wondering if you start by giving folks a little bit of introduction to your background.

Lindsay: 01:20 Yeah. I think the most important thing to know is that when I was like 29 years old, something like that, way back, I got sent to Jim Knight's first instructional coaching Institute in Kansas having no idea who he was, and that just sent me on a path to really having a passion for coaching all this time later. And then later, I had the opportunity to work on Jim Knight's team through Corwin, which also then put me on a path to work for John Hattie's team with visible learning and then, I just recently published a book couple years ago, "The Educoach Survival Guide," mostly about all the terrible stuff that happens in coaching that we then have to work through.

Steve: 02:01 Survive.

Lindsay: 02:02 Yeah, basically. Yes.

Steve: 02:04 Well it's such a neat connection because Jim Knight, Joellen Killion and I, the three of us, were in one of the first early videos about instructional coaching and the funny thing was none of the people watching the video knew that the three of us had never met. They had filmed the three sessions individually so since they brought those together, we've done a lot of work together over the years. I'll be I'll be heading to Jim's conference coming up this year. He's been on the podcast here with me, frequently. So talk a little bit about how you describe the importance of the the coach/principal relationship.

Lindsay: 02:47 Yeah. Well, I think one of the things that always comes to mind for me is that I've worked alongside a lot of principles and nobody really trained me in the beginning, what to do. We just kind of got thrown together and inevitably, there were so many things that went wrong because we were just thrown together and we didn't set up any true structures. So when I think about like a healthy coach/principle relationship, it's about having like partnership agreements together where you really sit down and you talk about how often are we gonna meet, what are we gonna talk about in those meetings? What kind of communication do we have? When is it okay to cancel a meeting? When is it not okay to cancel a meeting? What confidentiality do we share, not share? All of those kinds of things. And then also, just thinking about like what are their shared beliefs and visions about coaching? Because sometimes it can be so different and even if two people come with different beliefs, they should find a way to craft some sort of shared agreements.

Steve: 03:50 In the last session that I was sitting in on with the table of coaches, Diane Sweeney was talking about the coach/principal relationship and I said, I like to describe it at its easiest level. At the easiest level is, the job of the coach is to make the principal look good and the job of the principal is to make the coach look good. And if we both will

approach it that way, then you know that I want teachers to see you in the best light and you want teachers to see me in the best light that we can build our partnership from there.

Lindsay: 04:26 Yeah. And I have to have full disclaimer – I've never been a principal. I've worked alongside a lot of principals and I've been a coach, but I can't say that I know what it feels like to sit in that seat, but I can say that I know from a lot of experience supporting other coaches as well as myself, that if there's no support from the principal, it's like the effectiveness of the coaching program is just gonna be really limited.

Steve: 04:48 I haven't been a principal either and I've done a lot of principal training. But I always focus my principal piece on it, in that, in effect, when a district hires an instructional coach, they've actually made an investment in the principal's building. So in effect, I compare it to, if you bought an expensive copier and put it in your building, the district would be holding the principal accountable to see that the money was spent effectively. So if I bring that down, I'd suggest it's, it's the same with an instructional coach. They're a resource for the principal to achieve the goals of the building.

Lindsay: 05:32 It's so important for the principal to make sure the coach is actually doing the coaching because if then if they're not doing it, they're not really like meeting that initial investment that was made.

Steve: 05:43 Yeah. So in your session, you talked about the coach principal agreements and I'm wondering if you'd just give us a couple of the things that people should be considering on putting one of those agreements together.

Lindsay: 05:55 Yeah. I think in the beginning, it really comes down to just a lot of logistical agreements because I know that people communicate differently. When is it okay to text

each other or email each other, those kinds of like communication agreements as well as when we sit down and we have meetings, like who's making the agenda and how often do we do this? And I think meeting frequency is important because we all know if – you know, emergencies happen. If one meeting gets canceled last minute, that happens, but if it happens over and over and over again, pretty soon, then you're like, well, why are we meeting? What are we even doing? You're spending a lot of time catching up. So I think those agreements are important as well as just establishing what details about the teachers are being shared or about, like, are they learning together? I think the principal and the coach should be learning together as well. And that might be when they schedule time to do instructional rounds or observations, those kinds of things.

Steve: 06:52 So fair to use the word expectations?

Lindsay: 06:55 Yeah. But I think they should be formalized.

Steve: 06:57 Yeah. Formalized expectations.

Lindsay: 06:59 Yeah. I don't think it's very helpful at the beginning of the year. I mean, everybody sits down and they all have a smile at
the beginning. They're like, this is how it's gonna be. And then in November, they're not smiling anymore. And so I think if you have those expectations, written down, then you can revisit them and say what's working or what's not working.

Steve: 07:18 I had to laugh because when I was sitting in your session, you commented on the job description and how lots of places don't like to have a job description. I wrote a blog and did a podcast on that because I found one where it was like a list of 27 things that the coach was accountable for. And the last one was, anything else the principal requests.

Lindsay: 07:43 Yes. I feel like I've seen that everywhere – like, duties as a sign.

Steve: 07:47 So pretty hard for a coach to be keeping track of that you're effectively using your time. So in my head, relationships with teachers are critical for the coach to have, and they're critical for the principal to have. And I'm wondering if you'd talk a little bit – how do you see a principal supporting the coach relationship with teachers > and how do you see the coach supporting the principal's relationship with teachers?

Lindsay: 08:22 Yeah, I think at the beginning of the year, what is really helpful for a principal to do is make sure that they're advocating for coaching and not assigning. Like, you have to fix this teacher, you have to work with the coach, but at the very beginning of the year, really publicizing just what is coaching and how can teachers access the coach. What's the purpose of it? As well as I think, modeling, reflecting on their own practice and maybe some of the shared decisions that are made with the coach. I also think it's really important for a principal, again, to have role clarity in terms of what is the coach supposed to be doing because a lot of coaches come into the role, not really knowing. I mean, even I had formal training from Jim Knight before I became a coach, but when I actually got into the building, I thought, what am I supposed to be doing all day?

Lindsay: 09:10 Like, I know what a coaching cycle is, but what do I do? And that was really hard. I was really lucky to have a great principal who pretty much spelled it out for me, but most people are not that lucky. So I think a principal just making sure that they're clear on what coaching is. Then on the flip side, I think like what you said earlier, a coach makes principal look good too. I think a coach can really support a principal by just really listening when they meet and hearing what's pressing on the principal's mind, as well as really figuring out like, if this is the school's instructional mission or vision, how do you then translate that into working with teachers?

Steve: 09:50 So in effect, they work for each other.

Lindsay: 09:54 Yeah. They should.

Steve: 09:56 And they have the common goal of whatever the advancement of student learning for the school is.

Lindsay: 10:03 Yeah. And I think, a lot of principals that I've met do not really have access to a lot of coaching or mentoring. I mean, there might be a little bit, but from my experience, I haven't met a lot of principals who have a lot of coaching. So the coach then sort of inevitably falls into also kind of coaching the principal, which can be awkward. But I also think it's a really great opportunity for coaches to show principles what they do.

Steve: 10:28 Agreed. And I think we can flip it too. So the coach inviting the principal to coach. "I'm gonna model a lesson in this teacher's classroom. I'd love if you could stop by and do a coaching session with me." And then, if we can get them to go to the next step, which is invite the teacher tp whose classroom you modeled in to sit in on the coach being coached by the principal, I think we really got opportunities to set that culture.

Lindsay: 10:55 Yeah. I mean, it should be a symbiotic relationship.

Steve: 11:00 Yep.

Steve: 11:03 One that I push for school leadership teams is a great start of the year is for the members of the school leadership team to pass
their professional growth plans for the year out to the teachers. So if the year started by the coach saying, here's how I'm looking to grow, the principal says here's how I'm looking to grow. We're open to the staff giving us feedback on that. Now we're gonna model that same coachability that we're asking the teachers to step into.

Lindsay: 11:34 Absolutely.

Steve: 11:36 Wondering what advice you'd have for for new coaches. I have to tell you, I sat next to one in your session today and she was writing down everything you said.

Lindsay: 11:44 When you're a new coach right now it's like information with a fire hose.

Steve: 11:50 Just some of the most important you think for a new coach. And I gotta tell you – this gal in your session, she hasn't met the principal yet. So she's a first year coach going into a situation where she hasn't met the principal.

Lindsay: 12:03 I think, and maybe this is just my personality or my disposition, but when you go in, just listen. Just listen, observe,
even if you know the school, like I was a teacher who then became a coach in my school and had a lot of like, whoa, like, the lid is lifted. A lot of things that I wasn't expecting to see or know about. So just really going in and sort of thinking like a scientist. Just what am I seeing, collecting information and even informal meet and greets with teachers is still collecting information. But I really think to just be visible in the hallways and see what's happening is a really good way for coaches just to get a sense of what the culture of learning in the school is.

Steve: 12:49 I love that statement. "Think like a scientist." Yeah. That's perfect. Perfect. How about any advice for for new principals coming into position? Most principals had nothing in their leadership training about how to work with the coach in your school.

Lindsay: 13:08 Yeah. Like I said, I've never sat in the principal seat, but what I could say is that if you are really invested in the
professional learning of your staff, you have to give your coach time to coach. So you're gonna be really tempted to

assign them a lot of lunch duty or have them sub in classrooms or plan that meeting last minute because you didn't get to it. And that is not a good use of the coach's time, especially if there's only one coach in the building. You know, I always think about it like if you owned a bakery and you had this really amazing pastry chef but the pastry chef was like always in the back washing the dishes, trying to like catch up and they were the cashier, like, how good was your pastries be?

Steve: 13:53 That's a great picture.

Lindsay: 13:54 So if you only have one person specifically selected to do this one role, why would you reroute them and have them do something else? And I know that it's really hard right now. There's a shortage of everything. I have definitely experienced it, but you've gotta just provide time for the coach to coach.

Steve: 14:12 If a principal and coach are both brave enough, I did find a coach, a principal pair that once every two weeks when they met, the coach shared her schedule for the past few weeks, but she color coded the schedule. So she marked green the things that she did that she thought were going to have the greatest impact on student learning. She marked yellow things that she wasn't sure. "I was at this PLC meeting, but I'm not sure how much I impacted student achievement there." And then red was, I'm pretty sure that that kids aren't learning more today because they did this…We all know there's gotta be some red, but the question is how much of it is showing up there?

Lindsay: 15:00 Yeah. I've done something really similar where I felt, honestly, I had a coaching client where I was spending an abnormal amount of time with them and I was not seeing any movement and I color coded my schedule, brought it to my supervisor and just said, what do you want me to do with this? I'm not making a judgment, but what do you want me to do? And he said, "use your time in another way." Like, he gave me

permission to then go and use my time more wisely. I think it’s great.

Steve: 15:27 Well Lindsay, I really appreciate the time you’ve given us here. Wanna tell folks a little bit about some of the things that are in
your book?

Lindsay: 15:35 Yeah. So when we first published our survival guide in 2020, we didn’t realize how necessary a survival guide in 2020 would be. But essentially it is a field guide. That’s not meant to be read cover to cover. It’s got 47 scenarios that are organized – the coach, the teachers, the principal and teams. And so if you are just like stuck and you’re like, man, I have a teacher and they just keep canceling on me, I don’t know what to do. Then you can just open up to those pages. There’s like a plan A, plan B, plan C and then we have, because I know everybody’s got this robust coaching library on their shelf, it’s like, if this is your issue, you can look at our plan for just a quick, in the moment strategy, but then go to like a Jim Knight book or an Elena Aguilar book.

Lindsay: 16:22 Right. And here are the pages and here’s the chapter that would give you more insight into those issues. You know, and we really believe too that the coach needs to be clear on them on their own practice first. So I’d say like probably the first 17 or 18 scenarios are really all about like the coach. The coach wants to build relationships, coach feels isolated, coach wants to collect data on their coaching, those kinds of things, as well as then, like, okay, now you’ve got a teacher who’s really overwhelmed. What do you do? Or you’ve got a principle kind of fishing for confidential details. What do you do? So yeah, we just really want it to be an easy guide to open.

Steve: 17:01 Terrific. You wanna tell folks the way to find your book and ways they can communicate communicate with you

if they have questions?

Lindsay: 17:08 Yeah. You can just look up the Educoach Survival Guide on Amazon or our website is the educoachguide.com, but I'm on Twitter – @TheRealLindsay2, but if anybody reaches out, I always respond. I love to hear from coaches.

Steve: 17:27 Terrific. Well, we'll be sure to stick that in the in the lead-in to this this podcast. So thanks again and enjoy the rest of your conference.

Lindsay: 17:35 Thank you.

Steve [Outro]: 17:38 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkle Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.