

BREAKING RANKS IN PRACTICE BREAKING RANKS IN PRACTICE

Aligning Professional Development With School Needs

Collegial coaching allows educators to experience on-the-job feedback to improve their practices.

By Peter Reed

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Near the end of a recent conversation about aligned *Breaking Ranks* professional development opportunities for teachers, the principal of a large, successful high school confided that she had neither adequate funding nor time for professional development activities for herself and her leadership team. What a terrible situation! Schools will not change or improve unless the performance capacity of everyone who works in the school improves. “Everyone” includes the members of the leadership team.

NASSP staff members often ask successful leaders, “How did you get to be as good as you are?” The most frequent response to the question is best summarized as, “Just by doing the job!” Their full responses reveal such concepts as learning from one’s successes and mistakes; taking risks to try different approaches until finding the best one; watching others do a job successfully; making adjustments on the basis of praise, criticism, and feedback; and receiving the support and guidance of mentors and colleagues who were willing to guide, teach, and coach.

Such growth opportunities have benefited thousands of successful leaders, so school leaders short on time and funds might consider purposefully and intentionally incorporating some of the concepts into their practice through collegial coaching. Although it takes discipline and a willingness on the part of leaders to share in one another’s growth for the benefit of their students, collegial coaching with a leadership team models effective professional development behavior for teachers and others.

Trust is essential among colleagues who acknowledge that they are not perfect and are seeking to learn from

experiences—their own and those of coworkers. Where collegial trust is weak or does not exist, engaging in professional growth activities together may provide a foundation for it to develop or strengthen.

The ability to listen and ask the right questions is also important to the success of collegial coaching. This strategy provides opportunities for leadership teams to engage in job-embedded professional development as a part of their daily work experiences as they enhance their performance capacity and effectiveness in meeting the real needs of the school community.

Just as having a physical exam is advisable before beginning a new diet and exercise regime, an assessment of professional skills and knowledge is recommended before engaging in meaningful professional development. The leadership team’s knowledge of each of its member’s capacity not only enables the team to more-effectively assign responsibilities but also provides a foundation for collaborating in shared professional growth. Some of the tools for assessing professional strengths include 360-degree assessments (www.principals.org/Content.aspx?topic=55677), the NASSP online skills assessment (www.principals.org/lisa), input and feedback from colleagues and mentors, performance appraisal data, and other assessments of talents and characteristics. Assessment of strengths and weaknesses provides members of the team with data to inform their decisions about the areas on which they want to focus their development.

Collegial Observations and Coaching

After making decisions about what skills or knowledge to develop, team

Effective Listening and Questioning

Effective Listening

- Stop talking and listen to every word. If you are talking, you are not listening!
- Avoid distractions. Give the speaker your full attention; do not try to attend to other matters, such as phone calls or paperwork, during your conversation.
- Show your attention through eye contact, head nods, and attentive posture.
- Do not interrupt the other person; give the person a chance to say what he or she has to say.
- Ask probing questions to get more clarifying information, but avoid asking embarrassing or insensitive questions.
- Empathize with the other person. Reserve judgment and try to put yourself in that person's place to better understand what he or she is saying.
- Concentrate on what the person is saying and avoid thinking ahead to what you are going to say.
- Listen for what is not said. Often what a person does not say is as important to understanding the situation as what he or she does say.
- Listen to how something is said. A person's attitudes and emotional reactions may be more important than the actual words.
- Avoid making assumptions about what a person means, intends, thinks, or feels. Listen for specific information and ask clarifying questions.
- Avoid classifying the speaker. Frequently, we label someone as one type of person ("he is a conservative") and then try to fit everything the person says or does into the context of that label. This usually means that our perceptions of what that person says or means are shaded by whether we like or dislike the attributes we associate with how we've classified him or her.
- Recognize your own biases toward the speaker, the subject, and the situation. Work to overcome the effect they may have on your ability to really listen and understand the other person.

Effective Questioning

- Elicit perceptions, feelings, and concerns:
"How do you think you handled the situation?"
"How do you feel about the way you've handled the situation?"

"What do you perceive as the major issues in the situation?"

"What major concerns do you have about the situation?"

- Express verbal and nonverbal recognition of feelings:
Paraphrase what you heard: "So what concerns you is..." and "Let's see if I understand what you've said..."

Maintain appropriate eye contact and be aware of facial expressions.

- Accurately reflect the point of view of another:

"You haven't been able to..."

"You would like to..."

"What would you like to see happen?"

"What could you do to create a win-win situation?"

"What I think I heard you say is..."

- Seek and give feedback:

"What did you do well in this situation?"

"What would you do differently?"

"What options have you considered?"

"Have you thought of...?"

"Could you say more about that?"

- Explore alternatives:

"What might you have done instead?"

"Since you have no control over these external variables, what adjustments might you make in the things you can control?"

"Let's brainstorm different ways to approach this and then come back and consider the implications of each."

"What might be the result of taking that approach?"

"What options do you see as the most viable?"

Adapted from the *Breaking Ranks: Mentoring and Coaching* professional development program.

members are ready to begin coaching one another. During collegial coaching:

- One colleague asks another to observe his or her performance in a specific situation to note demonstrations of specific skills or behaviors.
- During the performance, the observer records what his or her colleague says and does.
- Following the performance, the observer analyzes the data collected and prepares to give the performer feedback. Simultaneously, the performer reflects on what he or she did well and what needs improvement.
- The observer leads a feedback conversation to discuss what happened during the performance and asks the performer to share his or her reflections. The observer then shares two or three effective behaviors that he or she saw and gives one suggestion for improving the performance. He or she supports these observations and suggestions with data collected during the performance. The observer then asks questions that prompt further reflection. Both people discuss ways that the performer can build on his or her strengths and refine less-effective behaviors. They schedule a follow-up to discuss progress and challenges.

Reflection as the Basis for Collegial Coaching

When an observation is not convenient or practical, collegial coaching can be based on the performer's re-

flexive review of a situation or event. This approach requires that the performer review and analyze his or her own behavior and to write responses to the following prompts before talking with a collegial coach.

- Describe the basic nature of the situation and explain how or why it developed.
- What are the primary issues and concerns—yours and those of others?
- What were your objectives and strategies when you approached the situation?
- What data did you have? Need, but did not have?
- Describe the essential verbal and nonverbal behavior of the people involved in the situation, including yourself.
- What are the outcomes to date? What are your reactions to those outcomes?
- What did you do to contribute positively to the outcomes? What might you have done differently to contribute to a better outcome?
- What you have learned from the situation thus far?

The performer schedules a coaching conversation to discuss the situation. Sending a copy of the reflective review will help the coach prepare in advance for the conversation. The written review also helps keep the conversation focused.

During the coaching session, the performer provides a summary of the information that was written in response to the reflective review prompts while the coach listens and makes notes to facilitate further reflection.

Following the summary, the coach leads a discussion of what happened during the situation and uses probing questions that focus on the performer's actions. The colleagues discuss and agree on next steps that will build on the strengths that the performer demonstrated in the situation and refine less-effective behaviors. They agree on a time and place for a follow-up discussion to discuss progress and challenges.

Working Together

Working together, colleagues who make up a leadership team can use their own experiences and expertise to help one another explore ways to improve performance and effectiveness. Too frequently, seminars, workshops, courses, and other formal learning opportunities are the only strategies that come to mind when someone mentions professional development. A school can provide the very best laboratory for the exercise, practice, and development of school leadership if leaders seize the opportunities for trying new behaviors, reflecting on their own performance, seeking and giving collegial feedback, adjusting performance on the basis of that reflection and feedback, and adapting emerging strengths to meet new and different challenges as they arise. Engaging in a process that builds the capacity of school leaders to effectively address the real issues of the school community gives deeper meaning to efforts to align professional development with the school's desired learning outcomes, the most effective instructional strategies, and the development of learners. **PL**