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 Coaching: The New Leadership Skill Pages 7-7

## Perspectives / The Art of Changing Minds

Marge Scherer

*Something about teaching is so personal and raw that teachers spend a lot of energy avoiding serious help from those who could best give it... Maybe I have to do some rethinking about how to bring the ideals of trust and democracy together to resolve a contradiction that I had underestimated.*

—Deborah Meier

Deborah Meier is responding to a writing prompt in Richard Elmore's new book: *I Used to Think... And Now I Think...*<sup>1</sup> In this book, 20 leading educators, researchers, and policy analysts individually reexamine their longstanding views on such school reform topics as community schools, inclusion, the role of unions, the effectiveness of turnaround strategies, and even their faith that any single public policy can make a difference in improving schools.

Although some of the book's contributors have reversed their previously held beliefs, Meier admits that she is still pondering the questions she had when she began her career. As the founder of schools whose purpose was to create strong adult communities in which wary kids could let down their guard and learn, she found that the lack of trust among the adults was often a sticking point. She writes, "If we cannot even trust each other as professionals, how can we expect the families and children to trust us?"

The trust that Meier writes about is deeply relevant to the theme of this month's *EL*: coaching. The aim of coaching is to get educators to reflect and improve on their theory and practice—to ponder, as Elmore's book title suggests, what they used to do and think, and to be open to changing their minds. By helping educators learn for themselves and from one another, our authors argue, coaching can boost teacher effectiveness, enhance student learning, deepen subject area expertise, and improve staff relationships.

To start, Bob and Megan Tschannen-Moran (p. 10) tell us that we must clarify the differences between coaching and evaluation. Whereas evaluation is meant to identify deficiencies and hold educators accountable, coaching supports excellence by tapping into the ways adults learn. Although both evaluation and coaching have their place in schools, research into adult learning points to three principles that are crucial to successful coaching: it must be teacher-centered, it must be no-fault, and it must be strengths-based. The more knowledgeable the coach, the more tempted that coach may be to be an advisor rather than a partner. Unfortunately, this often undermines learning. "People don't resist change; they resist *being changed*," the authors write.

In "Modeling Lessons," Katherine Casey (p. 24) reinforces the idea that teachers need to see effective instructional strategies in action before they can make them their own. She talks about the value of making visible the invisible decisions made in classrooms and narrowing the focus of demonstration lessons so that teachers can be students of good teaching. Yet even the best demonstrations are useless if the designated observer starts correcting papers or takes a coffee break during the

lesson. When that has occasionally happened to her, Casey writes, it was often because she had failed to talk over the purpose of the demonstration with the teacher.

Our authors make clear that coaching is not a monolithic practice. Coaches may be principals or teachers, visiting professors or school colleagues. They may be literacy coaches, data coaches, technology coaches, even virtual coaches. They may coach a group or work one-on-one. And the coaches themselves can be a cohort, further blurring the distinctions between coach and coachee.

Two of the most effective practices—instructional rounds (p. 36) and lesson planning (p. 64)—start by focusing on very different things. In instructional rounds, educators seek to observe and document trends in practice at a given school. Those involved in lesson study engage with curriculum and standards as they analyze lessons.

Michael Fullan and Jim Knight (p. 50) remind us that coaching is not without difficulty. Schools can squander their coaching efforts if they assign coaches the wrong work, for example. If coaches do not know that their goal is to help colleagues improve instruction or if they are not trained communicators and leaders, the results of coaching may be minimal.

Yet coaching can be one of the most rewarding learning opportunities for participants and is most certainly a promising practice for the profession. In times when so many mandates come from above or entirely from outside the field of education, coaching is a refreshing way educators can improve from within.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Elmore, R. F. (2011). *I used to think... And now I think...* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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