

The Coach Approach

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“I feel like I’m a horrible teacher. I’m overwhelmed,” Emily Weber said after my first visit to her classroom, halfway through Emily’s first year as a 2nd grade teacher at West Oak Lane Charter School in Philadelphia. “Well, let’s work together to un-overwhelm you,” I replied. And so began our first coaching conference where, as is the case with most of my conferences, my feedback for Emily would fall into two categories:

- *Effective Practices*: identifying and reinforcing what she was already doing well
- *Enhancements*: building on and adding to her current repertoire of skills

Whether or not teachers benefit from this feedback depends as much on their “coachability” as my coaching ability, since a coach’s expertise means little if teachers are unwilling to change their practice. Fortunately, in my experience people are open to change as long as they get the right support. I first learned this in business while working for a company that decided to automate its purchasing system. We had a veteran staff, so you can imagine the resistance when we announced the change: “The current system works just fine.” But after just one week of using the new system, a once-resistant 35-year veteran spoke for the whole staff when he said, “I don’t know how we ever did it the old way.”

A key to our staff embracing this change was providing them the right support, including hands-on training and coaching from the technology team before we launched the new system, and ongoing troubleshooting from them afterward. Teachers are no different. Give them the right support, and meaningful change follows.

The question, then: what is the right support? And the answer, for me, also comes from my days in business, when I was the junior member of a team that negotiated vendor contracts. I had no prior training or experience in negotiations. Yet within six weeks I was an effective negotiator. And a big reason for this: coaching. Sure I had the potential to be successful, but there’s no way I would have realized that potential without expert coaching, including critical feedback from other members of the team.

The same goes for teaching. In fact, while it was my experience in business that inspired the “coach approach” I now use to support teachers, it’s been teachers’ response to this approach over the past ten years that has reinforced it. Here are a few examples.

The New Teacher: Emily

Emily, the overwhelmed 2nd grade teacher, needed the same individualized coaching most teachers could benefit from. Our first coaching session began with me identifying Emily’s current effective practices. Doing this sets a positive tone for the coaching process because it tells teachers I’m there to reinforce their practice

rather than reinvent it. And for struggling teachers like Emily, just knowing they're doing some things well can help restore hope and confidence.

Another reason to start with effective practices is that teachers often don't know what they're doing well, and are therefore inconsistent with those practices. This lack of consistency provides a bridge from effective practices to enhancements, since a quick way for teachers to be more effective overall is to be more consistent with what they're already doing well.

In Emily's case, I noticed her respond inconsistently when students were off task. Sometimes she called out to students from across the room: "No talking, Anthony. You should be working." Other times she approached students at their desks to find out why they were off task, and then helped them get on task. It was an immediate ah-hah moment for Emily when I shared these observations with her. Without another word from me, she realized how much more cooperative students were when she used an up close and personal troubleshooting approach than when, in her words, she barked at them. So from that point on, Emily stuck with the troubleshooting approach when students were off task.

Ideally, of course, students wouldn't be off task in the first place, which became the goal of further enhancements in future coaching sessions with Emily. (I prefer the word "enhancement" over "improvement" because it conveys to teachers once again that I'm there to build on what they're already doing well rather than overhaul their entire practice.) The process began, as it always does, with me establishing cause-effect relationships between teacher actions (or inactions) and undesirable student reactions. Being put under a microscope like this can be provocative for teachers. But as long as I tie my feedback to actual classroom observations rather than opinions, teachers respond openly rather than defensively.

In Emily's classroom, I observed several cause-effect connections related to communication. She was, for example, using negative language that elicited resistance from students rather than cooperation. And with respect to procedures, though Emily knew what she expected of students, she often failed to communicate this clearly to them. The beauty of this cause-effect analysis is that once teachers understand the causes of their problems, solutions often follow with little thought or discussion. Here are a few of the cause-effect connections I identified for Emily, and how we agreed she would respond to them (solutions):

Teacher Action (Cause)	Student Reaction (Effect)	Solution(s)
Used negative statements such as "we still don't have active listening" and "I don't have your full attention"	Students ignored or defied teacher's requests	Use "I need" or "we need" rather than "I don't" or "we don't" (e.g., I need active listening vs. we don't have active listening)
Passed out materials before reviewing directions, and only reviewed directions orally	Students played with the materials and did not get started on the assignment until teacher came over to their desks to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and assess students' understanding of directions before passing out materials • Use overhead projector to give directions and expectations

	restate the directions	visually in addition to orally
Failed to let students know in advance what they should do if they finished the assignment early	Early finishers walked around the room and interrupted classmates who were still working on the assignment	Include in directions for all activities a constructive activity for students to move on to if they finish early

By my 8th and final visit to her classroom, Emily (who was highly coachable!) had implemented each of the above ideas as well as several other enhancements we discussed. And the effect was profound. Class that day began with Emily reviewing directions for an assignment using the overhead projector. She then confirmed students understood those directions before instructing them to obtain materials and begin working on the assignment. And from start to finish, *every* student was engaged, including one girl who, after completing the assignment, was reading a book on the rug in the rear of the room—perfectly acceptable in accordance with Emily’s new “early finisher” instructions.

Most memorable for me that day was when a boy called me over for help. “I’d like to help, but doesn’t Ms. Weber want you to ask your classmates for help when you’re stuck?” I said. “Yes, but I already asked “three before me,”” the boy replied, a reference to Emily’s rule requiring students to ask three classmates for help before asking her.

Clearly Emily Weber was no longer the only one who knew what she expected of students. And just eight weeks after considering herself a horrible teacher, she was on her way to becoming an effective one.

The Veteran Teacher: Bill

“I’m stale,” Bill Buchanan said, in reaching out to me for classroom coaching. “And I’m boring the kids to tears.” Bill was in his 19th year as a Chicago Public Schools math teacher at the time, and had received a superior teacher rating each of the previous 18 years. What’s more, he was halfway through the National Board Certification process. By all accounts, then, Bill did not need coaching; he wanted it.

As with Emily, my work with Bill focused on reinforcing and enhancing what he was already doing well. But whereas the focus in Emily’s case was classroom management, for Bill it was curriculum and instruction. In particular, we set three goals: improving students’ grasp of foundational algebra concepts, delivering content in more interactive ways than traditional lecture, and developing students’ higher order thinking skills.

Our work around math content involved troubleshooting common student misconceptions, and helping students derive and apply rules rather than simply memorize them. To make lessons more interactive, we worked on questions aimed at getting information from students rather than giving it to them. And we achieved the third goal—higher order thinking—through a variety of ideas including asking students “why” before “how,” and enrichment activities such as math games and puzzles.

And though the targets of enhancement for veteran teachers like Bill may be different than those for new teachers like Emily, the benefits are the same. “Prior to receiving coaching, I was questioning how much longer I could stay in the classroom,” said Bill Buchanan, after five more years in the classroom and two as an instructional coach. “Coaching helped restore my enthusiasm for teaching and improve my effectiveness at it.”

The Team: Nueva Esperanza

It took only a few hours at Nueva Esperanza Academy Charter High School in Philadelphia for me to know what a special place it was. I had never been in a school where mutual respect and support among and between all parties—administration, staff, and students—was more evident than it was at Esperanza. Support staff in the halls exhorting (not yelling at) students to get to class—and students responding without a fuss; administrators with a friendly yet businesslike presence throughout the building; students being playful but respectful toward each other; and well-managed classrooms with caring, hard-working, talented teachers.

Just one problem: Esperanza students were performing well below their potential academically (according to state test results for several years running). The question, of course: why? And when I asked this question at my first meeting with Esperanza’s math department, there was consensus around one factor: students’ lack of long-term retention. “Teach them something today, and they’ve forgotten it by tomorrow,” one teacher said.

“I can relate,” I replied, and then gave an overview of two strategies that helped improve retention among my students as well as those of many teachers I had previously coached:

1. *Concept Cards*: a note-taking system that is more efficient for students than using a traditional notebook
2. *Collaborative Groups*: heterogeneous groups where students work on assignments individually and self-paced, but consult with classmates when stuck; and where teachers actively assess students but only assist them when they’ve exhausted all other resources

When I asked teachers how they felt about pursuing these strategies, one of them replied, “What we’re doing obviously isn’t working, so what have we got to lose?!” And with that, we laid out a plan for me to introduce and help teachers implement Concept Cards and Collaborative Groups.

Pursuing common solutions to common challenges like this for a group of teachers can be great for them and students alike. By all teachers using collaborative groups, for example, there would be no adjustment for Esperanza students when they had different teachers from one year to the next. And teachers benefit from standardizing certain strategies, since they can share and learn from each others’ experiences using those strategies.

Standardized strategies also allow for more efficient use of professional development time, since I can introduce them to teachers as a group rather than individually. That’s what I did at Esperanza, where I presented one of the above strategies at each of the next two weekly math department meetings.

Implementation, on the other hand, often requires hands-on support, since it's unreasonable to expect teachers to be effective with many new strategies after just one workshop. Fortunately, Esperanza's leadership team understood this, and also enlisted me to support teachers in the classroom, where I not only provided individualized coaching like I did for Emily and Bill, but also helped teachers implement Concept Cards and Collaborative Groups.

This combination of standardized strategies among groups of teachers—by grade level, subject, or school wide—and individualized coaching has consistently helped improve instructional quality at schools I've supported over the years. And Nueva Esperanza Academy Charter High School was no exception. "Our teachers have always been hard-working and capable. They just needed new ideas for meeting challenges that were holding students back," says Esperanza's Director of Instruction Aurelio Tellado. "Learning has improved because teaching has improved, and coaching has been a big part of this."

The Common Denominator: Coaching

New teacher Emily, veteran Bill, and team Esperanza. Three situations, three sets of challenges—but one common approach toward addressing them: The Coach Approach.

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