

## Why Do Teachers Need Instructional Coaches?



When I was a long distance runner...40 pounds ago...I had four coaches over a span of 12 years who had an enormous impact on my success as a runner. Keep in mind that success is a relative term because I was not going to the Olympic trials or anything. Pat Sweeney and Bob Underwood coached me together while I was in high school, Ron Mulson was known as *coach* while I attended Hudson Valley Community College, and JR Gage was my coach while I attended the College of Saint Rose.

At different times in my athletic career, these coaches helped me lower my arms to be more efficient, lengthen my stride, increase my strength on hills, and helped me drop my times at every distance from the mile to 10 miles. Running, for better or worse, was a focal point in my life.

*And then something happened.*

I started running and training by myself after I finished college because I thought I could do it all by myself, and certainly couldn't afford a private coach. I found that, not only couldn't I do it on my own, I ended up hurting myself in the process to the point that I cannot run anymore.

What does this have to do with teaching? As teachers, we spend an enormous amount of time on our own in our classrooms. Actually, let me correct that. We spend a lot of time with our students, and we are often the only adults. Many of us prefer to work without adults around.

When we spend a lot of time as the only adults in the classroom we often engage in activities that we think are really successful. How couldn't they be? We created most of them! But, I often think that we may not be as successful as we think we are. Kind of like our first year as teachers.

*Do you remember your first year?*

### **Keeping Our Heads Above Water**

Most teachers and leaders would agree that we all are lifelong learners, but that was easier to admit in our first year of teaching. As a first year teacher I had so much to learn. I had to learn how to talk with parents without seeming like I was a "*know it all*" young guy. At that time in my life all the parents were older than me, so I struggled with what I could tell them about child behavior. Sure, I had a masters degree in educational psychology, but I didn't have children of my own, nor did I have much experience with students. I was learning on the job.

Then there were times when I had to learn how to get along with colleagues, which included my administrators. In many schools there is a big difference in age between the youngest teachers and the oldest...most veteran, which is why the **multi-generational work of Jen Abrams** is so important. Abrams' work should be a required reading in all pre-service teaching programs.

And finally, and most importantly, my learning revolved around helping students in the classroom learn. Figuring out how to get the most struggling learners to find success is not easy. Every struggling learner is like a puzzle that we have to figure out, so we can then help them to help themselves. When I was a young teacher I didn't always do a good job of that. I wish I could go back and undo some of the things that I did.

Truth be told, it didn't matter what stage of my career I was in as a teacher or a school leader, I could have always done better. There are always issues we do not see, which **Otto Scharmer refers to as blind spots**. Whether it's student learning, teacher instruction, or classroom management, we all can learn how to be better.

*And when we do it with a partner, we can retain so much of what we learned, so we can use it again in the future.*

### **Instructional Coaching**

According to **Jim Knight**, someone I work with as an instructional coaching trainer, up to 90% of what teachers learn alongside coaches will be retained. This means, that unlike traditional professional development where Knight's research shows that teachers lose 90% of what they learn, coaching can provide an enormous impact.

Knight's work is highly respected, and is highly respectful of teachers. Instructional coaching, in Knight's research and philosophy, is about working in partnership with teachers where the learning is reciprocal on the part of the teacher and coach. After all, we can learn a lot from one another.

In order for coaching to work properly, the school has to have a climate conducive to learning, which means that there needs to be a balance between risk-taking and rule following. It also means that teachers need to be able to trust that the coaching-teaching relationship will be confidential, something Knight believes both parties should come to an agreement on before the coaching relationship even begins.

And lastly, coaches cannot be used by school leaders as compliance officers (**something I wrote about here**) to make sure that all teachers are keeping pace with their grade level peers, and when they're not, are told on by the coaches.

### **In the End**

Perhaps it's due to the fact that I had great coaches who helped me increase my success as a runner that I have been so on board with instructional coaching. Or, maybe it's due to the fact that I never have, and never will, believe I know it all as a teacher or leader.

Working with an instructional coach doesn't mean that teachers are weak, it actually shows how strong they are because they believe they can always get better. Great instructional coaches that have an impact on teaching and learning in the classroom learn as much from the teacher they work with as the teacher learns from the coach.

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