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FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS



ARE YOU COACHING **HEAVY** OR **LIGHT**?

By Joellen Killion

If the primary goal of a coaching program is to improve student learning, then coaches focus their work on strengthening the quality of teaching and learning. If any of the providers of coaching — the school, the district, or the coach — is unclear about the goal of the coaching, then coaches will struggle to keep a laser-like focus on doing what matters.

I have been experimenting with how

I talk with coaches about the importance of their decisions related to how they allocate their time and services. I've come to believe that there are two kinds of coaching — coaching *light* and coaching *heavy*. The difference between them is essentially in the results produced. Aspects of a coach's belief system, the roles, and the context matter, too.

Coaching *light* results in coaches being accepted, appreciated, and even liked by their peers. When coaches' work is driven by the goal of being appreciated, coaches tend to say "yes" to services they believe will ingratiate them with staff members, particularly those who may exhibit some reluctance to working with a coach. Coaching *light* occurs when coaches want to build and maintain relationships more than they want to improve teaching and learning. From this perspective, coaches may act to increase their perceived value to teachers by providing resources *and* avoiding challenging conversations. They may provide demonstration lessons, share curriculum materials, or facilitate learning without holding an expectation that teachers apply the learning in their classrooms. While each service has value and contributes to improving teaching and learning, they can also be acts of avoidance.

From the perspective of the teacher,

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coaching light feels supportive. Teachers appreciate the resources and ideas, yet they simultaneously wonder if it wouldn't be better if the coach were working directly with students. Teachers feel as if they have an advocate in the coach, someone who understands the complexity of their work and who will empathize with them. They may request the same kind of resources or support from the coach that they might ask from a classroom aide, if they had one. Teachers acknowledge that they have received strategies and ideas from the coach that are useful and that they may even try some in their classrooms. Coaches who lack confidence and courage may tread lightly in their interactions with teachers and limit the focus of their interactions to praise or to questions that merely ask teachers to recall or describe their actions.

Light coaching examples

Examples of coaching *light* include testing students, gathering leveled books for teachers to use, doing repeated demonstration lessons, finding web sites for students to use, or sharing professional publications or information about workshops or conferences. Coaching *light* can even include feedback to teachers that describes teacher behaviors rather than student learning. Sometimes, in order to build relationships and establish their credibility, coaches may compromise their influence by engaging in tasks that have limited potential for impact on teaching and learning. This is coaching light.

Coaches may be saying, “Yes, but the services you describe as coaching *light* have the potential to build trusting relationships and establish my credibility and convey to teachers that we are serious when we say, ‘We are here to help you.’” I agree that coaching *light* achieves these goals, however, there are other ways to build trusting, professionally respectful relationships and establish credibility that are grounded in tackling the difficult issues and being willing to address what has previously been “undiscussable” in schools. “How well are my students doing and how can I improve my teaching so their learning improves?” These questions are crucial in ALL schools, not just the low-achieving schools in which many coaches work.

Heavy coaching examples

Coaching *heavy*, on the other hand, includes curriculum analysis, data analysis, instructional changes, and conversations about beliefs and how they influence practice.

Coaching *heavy*:

- Is driven by a coach’s deep commitment to improve teaching and learning, even if it means not being liked;
- Is focused on planning powerful instruction; implementing and analyzing frequent formative assessments; holding high expectations for teacher performance; and delivering a rigorous curriculum;
- Requires coaches to say “no” to trivial requests for support and to turn their attention to high-leverage services with the greatest potential for improving teaching and learning;
- Requires coaches to work with all teachers in a school, not just those who invite them to provide services; and
- Requires coaches to seek and use data about their work and regularly analyze decisions about time allocation, services, and impact.

When coaching *heavy*, coaches work outside their comfort zone and stretch their coaching skills, content knowledge, leadership skills, relationship skills, and instructional skills. They are increasingly aware of the beliefs that drive their actions and reexamine them frequently.

From a teacher’s perspective, coaching *heavy* feels heavy — in the sense of the weight of collective responsibility and commitment each teacher devotes to the success of every student. Teachers may spend more time working with teams of colleagues rather than alone to plan instruction, analyze assessment data, examine student work, conduct action research, and deprivatize their professional practices. To teachers, coaching *heavy* causes them to feel on edge, questioning their actions and decisions. This does not mean that teachers feel fear, anxiety, or dread. Rather, teachers feel a heightened sense of professionalism, excitement, increased efficacy, and satisfaction with teaching. Coaching *heavy* holds all adults responsible for student success and engages them as members of collaborative learning teams to learn, plan, reflect, analyze, and



Coaching heavy holds all adults responsible for student success and engages them as members of collaborative learning teams to learn, plan, reflect, analyze, and revise their daily teaching practices based on student learning results.

BELIEFS THAT MAY INTERFERE WITH ONE’S ABILITY TO COACH HEAVY AND POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS

Belief	Side effects
1. Being accepted gives me more leverage to work with teachers.	Working on being accepted may delay conversations on what matters most — teaching and learning.
2. Being viewed as credible is essential to being a coach.	Credibility emerges from the alignment between one’s actions and one’s words. Acting on what matters immediately builds credibility.
3. The work of coaches is to support teachers.	Saying that a coach’s role is to support teachers misleads teachers. A coach’s primary responsibility is to improve student learning.
4. Teachers resist change.	As professionals, teachers seek continuous improvement. Teachers are motivated to change when they see proven results in terms of student success. When that success becomes evident in their own classrooms, they become change enthusiasts.
5. Coaches can’t impose on teachers since they have no supervisory responsibilities.	Coaches can’t afford not to impose on what teachers believe and how that impacts their actions. Their work is too important and without conversations about beliefs, deep change is unlikely.
6. Helping teachers know about or learn how to implement new instructional strategies is a coach’s primary responsibility.	Coaches’ primary responsibility is student learning often mediated by teachers’ application of effective practices rather than knowing about or knowing how to use those practices.
7. Coaches are not responsible for what teachers do.	Coaches are responsible for helping teachers explore the beliefs that drive their actions. In dialogue, through reflective questioning, and by presenting data, coaches can influence what teachers think and do.

revise their daily teaching practices based on student learning results.

Coaching *heavy* occurs when coaches ask thought-provoking questions, uncover assumptions, and engage teachers in dialogue about their beliefs and goals rather than focusing only on teacher knowledge and skills. For example, rather than talking about what a teacher decided to do in a lesson, the coach asks the teacher to describe his or her belief about teaching, student learning, and student capacity to learn. These differences are not just subtle shifts in the way questions are worded, but rather tied directly to the coach’s desire to engage teachers in examining their mental models and how those beliefs drive their decisions and resulting behaviors. For example, rather than asking, “What did you think about when the students were unable to respond to your questions?” the coach asks, “What do you believe is the role of teacher questions in the learning process? What intentions do you hold

when asking questions in your lessons?” The purpose of interaction at the belief and goal level rather than at knowledge and skills level is to facilitate teachers’ exploration of who they are as teachers as much or more than what they do as teachers. At this level, deep reform can occur.

Refining the concept

I presented the concept of coaching *heavy* and coaching *light* to coaches in Walla Walla (Wash.) Public Schools. Where I have visualized coaching *heavy* and *light* as two ends of a seesaw with the light end in the air and the heavy end on the ground, they see an image that is more of a spiral with each revolution focusing more finitely on the target. Coaches, they said, use a blend of coaching *heavy* and *light* and with each turn they narrow their focus.

My perspective shifted as a result of listening to their thinking. Coaches may use both coaching *heavy* and coaching *light* in their repertoire of

strategies. But, beyond a few introductory weeks of coaching *light*, coaches must shift to coaching *heavy* and stay there. In this way, coaches increase the potential to significantly impact teaching practices and student learning. I will grant coaches a short period of time at the beginning of a new coaching program — when they are new to a school or when coaching is new to the school — to coach *light*. During this time, coaches assess the culture, context, and conditions in which they work. However, the shift to coaching *heavy* cannot wait long because students cannot wait for the best teaching possible.

When I talked with a team of coaches in Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools about coaching *heavy* and coaching *light*, I expressed my uncertainty about using the words *heavy* and *light*. I told them that I worry that coaching *heavy* connotes that coaching is focused on corrective action or conveys a supervisory or evaluative orientation to coaching. This is not my intention with coaching *heavy*. Rather, the orientation is one of laser-like focus on the work of improving teaching and student learning. Like a laser, a coach focuses intense energy into a small space. That small space is the interaction that occurs between teachers and students.

These insightful coaches suggested another way to describe coaching *heavy* and coaching *light* — coaching shallow and coaching deep. I share their metaphor with my own embellishments. In shallow water, both the coach and teacher feel safe. They can touch bottom. They have a limited perspective of what it means to swim because they can still stand. In deep water, however, both the coach and the teacher, unless they are competent swimmers, are out of a comfort zone since they must depend on their swimming skills to be safe. Depending on their skills, they may experience anxiety or even fear. Coaches can provide flotation devices to reduce anxiety if necessary, yet coaches must be competent swimmers and stand ready to rescue a teacher who does not swim well. Coaches and teachers together can work on improving the strength and accuracy of their strokes so they grow as competent and confident in deep water as they are in shallow water. Eventually, non-swimmers develop a view of themselves as mas-

ter of both elementary and advanced swim strokes and, when they demonstrate that they have become swimmers, they navigate easily and eagerly and even for distances.

What I am asking of coaches demands that they shift from being liked and appreciated to making a difference. Coaches may need to examine their beliefs about who they are as a coach, the role of coaching in the school, and about change. These beliefs drive who they are as coaches. Coaching heavy requires that coaches move to the edge of or beyond their comfort zone and even their competence to encourage teachers to move beyond theirs as well. For some coaches, the thought of this produces tremendous anxiety. When coaches opt to stay in their own or in teachers' comfort zone too long, they limit the impact of their work and even waste their precious time and the resource of coaching. Coaches' decision to stay in their comfort zone, I believe, is based on their beliefs about the role of a coach or about how to improve teaching and student learning. (See chart on p. 3.)

Conclusion

The work of coaching is complex and challenging. What coaches do each day influences what teachers do and that, in turn, influences what students know and do. When coaches allocate time to services with the greatest potential for deep change in teaching and learning within their schools, students, teachers, and principals benefit. Every student succeeds as a result of high-quality teaching. Every teacher succeeds as a result of coaching *heavy*. No teacher faces an instructional challenge alone again. Every school community engages in ongoing, ruthless analysis of data, and continuous cycles of improvement that allow educators to measure results in a matter of weeks, not months or years. Coaches support teachers as they work together to resolve problems of practice and to make smarter, collaborative decisions enriched by the shared practice of the community. When coaches choose roles that have the greatest potential for impacting teaching and student learning, the perceived value of coaching and coaches will be unquestioned, even when budgets are tight and other competing priorities emerge. ♦

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