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Scott Dwayne Cakerice
University of Northern Iowa

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Peer coaching and the role of the principal

Abstract

The 1980s were subjected to pressures for educational reform. Many of these pressures were in direct relationship with the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. The preparation and training of teachers received the most attention in the reform movement. Many state agencies implemented new programs such as merit pay and career ladders. Today, another wave of reform is underway. The emphasis is now focused on restructuring schools. Educational leaders are now interested in improving the teaching profession. The leaders of state agencies and administrators want environments that help teachers and students grow to the greatest extent possible. This paper will explore the peer coaching program, its purposes, the considerations for a successful program, and the strategies for administrative support of this program.

CURRICULUM LABORATORY
UNIV. OF NORTHERN IOWA,
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PEER COACHING AND THE ROLE
OF THE PRINCIPAL

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Scott Dwayne Cakerice
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Date Approved

James L. Doud
Advisor/Director of Research Paper

6-26-91
Date Approved

Dave Else
Second Reader of Research Paper

6/24/91
Date Received

Dale R. Jackson
Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling

The 1980s were subjected to pressures for educational reform. Many of these pressures were in direct relationship with the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. The preparation and training of teachers received the most attention in the reform movement. Many state agencies implemented new programs such as merit pay and career ladders. Today, another wave of reform is underway. The emphasis is now focused on restructuring schools.

Educational leaders are now interested in improving the teaching profession. The leaders of state agencies and administrators want environments that help teachers and students grow to the greatest extent possible. This paper will explore the peer coaching program, its purposes, the considerations for a successful program, and the strategies for administrative support of this program.

What is Peer Coaching?

Peer coaching is a strategy aimed at improving teaching skills in which teachers work with one or more colleagues to achieve specific instructional goals through a process of regular observation and feedback (Hall & McKeen, 1989; Joyce & Showers, 1980a, 1980b, 1982). Coaching can be characterized as:

1. A community of learners engaging in the study of teaching.
2. A component of training that enhances the transfer of training of the classroom.
3. A support system that creates and sustains the community of learners.

Peer coaching is a confidential arrangement between peers that includes a focused classroom observation and feedback on that observation. It is not evaluation. It does not certify a teacher's effectiveness. Instead, coaching provides teachers a means of examining and reflecting on what they do in a psychologically safe environment where it is all right to experiment, fail, revise, and try again (Chase & Wolfe, 1989).

Purposes of Peer Coaching

Showers (1985) identifies three purposes of peer coaching. The first is to build communities of teachers who continuously engage in the study of their craft. Second, coaching develops the sharing of language and a set of common understandings necessary for the collegial study of new knowledge and skills. Especially important is the agreement that curriculum and instruction need constant improvement and that expanding our repertoire of teaching skills requires

hard work, in which the help of our colleagues is indispensable. Third, coaching provides a structure for the follow up to training that is essential for acquiring new teaching skills and strategies. Coaching appears to be most appropriate when teachers want to acquire unique configurations of teaching patterns and to master strategies that require new ways of thinking about learning objectives and the processes by which students achieve them.

Considerations Required for Coaching

Most educators agree that the considerations required for a successful peer coaching program for teachers include a non-threatening, nurturing environment; support from the school board, from district and building administrations, from teacher associations, and from all teachers involved; voluntary participation; confidentiality; and a clear separation from summative evaluation. The most important condition may be having a context for starting such a program. Implementing a program because it is the popular thing to do is worse than doing nothing at all (Strother, 1989).

There are considerations to be made before a peer coaching program can be adopted. One consideration is to decide which professional performances are to be

assessed. Specific behaviors consistent with research on effective teaching practices should be adopted. This implies that 10 or 12 broad practices should be identified and several specific performance indicators be delineated for each practice. This takes much time, and few tasks are more important than clear expectations.

A second consideration is to have a well organized coaching program. Communication between all teachers and administration is very important. A procedure should be implemented in the peer coaching program allowing this to happen. Administrative details should include decisions on pay and released time for peer coaches. If released time is a consideration, it must have its limits because schools cannot afford to pay substitute teachers on a continual basis.

Selection of peer coaches is a third consideration to be made before implementation can begin. Those in the position of peer coaches should receive extra recognition and/or extra pay. It is also important for staff members to understand that the position of peer coach will include those teachers who wish to coach and those who the administration feel will be successful as coaches. From this group of teachers, coaches are

chosen on a structured rotation procedure (Manning, 1986).

Teachers should coach each other. To do so, coaching teams need: (a) familiarity with the new skill or strategy to be mastered and transferred into the teacher's active repertoire; (b) access to other teachers in their classrooms for purposes of observation, feedback, and conferences; and (c) openness to experimentation and willingness to persist and refine skills (Showers, 1985). Supervisors and principals can coach effectively as well.

Training follows the selection of those who will coach. Showers (1985) describes one model of training coaches which includes two phases. The first phase consists of coaches viewing and participating in different types of coaching strategies. They then prepare lessons and present them to a partner. Three pairs of partners form a peer teaching group, with partners providing feedback on each other's lessons. Trainers monitor the feedback and teaching process during peer teaching and provide additional demonstrations as needed.

Training for the second phase of coaching occurs during follow-up sessions, usually three to six weeks after introduction of a new teaching strategy. As

coaches re-assemble in a large group, they discuss their mastery of the coaching strategies and any problems they are experiencing (Showers, 1985). Instruction in coaching then focuses on appropriate use of the teaching strategy. Coaches should bring examples of curriculum materials, texts, lesson plans, and objectives to the sessions. Then trainers model a collegial dialogue aimed at clarifying the instructional aims of the teachers. Peer coaching, in this phase of training, focuses on the appropriate use of newly mastered teaching strategies.

Models of Peer Coaching

The first task when implementing a peer coaching program is to select an appropriate model. The three most common coaching models described in the literature are (a) technical, (b) collegial, and (c) challenge coaching.

Technical Coaching

Technical coaching helps teachers transfer training to classroom practice while deepening collegiality, increasing professional dialogue, and giving teachers a shared vocabulary to talk about their craft. The approach assumes that objective feedback given in a non-threatening and supportive climate can improve teaching performance. Technical coaching

generally follows staff development workshops in specific teaching methods. The model pairs consultants with teachers or teachers with one another (Garmston, 1987).

Garmston (1987) describes the technical coaching model developed in 1983 by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. Teachers given technical coaching generally practice new strategies more frequently and develop greater skill, use the strategies more appropriately, and retain knowledge about the skill with the new strategies for longer periods of time. Teachers also teach the new strategies to their students and understand their purposes and uses more clearly.

Collegial Coaching

The major goals of collegial coaching are to refine teaching practices, reopen collegiality, increase professional dialogue, and to help teachers to think more deeply about their work. The long range goal in collegial coaching is for continuous self-perpetuating improvements in teaching (Garmston, 1987).

Collegial coaching, most often conducted in pairs, concentrates on areas the observed teacher wishes to learn more about. The observed teacher's priority determines the coaching focus. The peer coach

routinely gathers data about the teacher's priority, evidence of student learning, and the teacher's instructional decisions and behavior. The coach helps the observed teacher analyze and interpret it, and encourages the teacher to make applications to future teaching. The coach helps the teacher analyze and judge how his or her decisions affect student learning (Garmston, 1987).

Challenge Coaching

Challenge coaching helps teams of teachers resolve problems that are persistent in an instructional design or delivery. This model assumes that team problem-solving efforts by those responsible for carrying out instruction can produce practical improvements. Challenge coaching often evolves from other coaching approaches because trust, collegiality, and norms supporting problem solving in professional dialogue are prerequisite conditions. This coaching model differs from technical and collegial models in two ways: in its processes and in its products (Garmston, 1987).

The challenge coaching processes begin with the identification of a persistent problem or a desirable goal. While technical and collegial coaching are done most often in pairs, challenge coaching is done in

small groups. The small groups or teams usually consist of teachers, aides, librarians, and administrators. The non-certified personnel often add their special perceptions, expertise, or have a potential role in a solution.

Advantages/Disadvantages of Each Model

The positive effects of technical coaching are not without their price. With only a moderately difficult teaching strategy, teachers may require from 20 to 30 hours of instruction in its theory, 15 to 20 demonstrations using it with different students and subjects, and an additional 10 to 15 coaching sessions to attain higher level skills. These experiences add up in costs for consultant time and released time (Garmston, 1987; Shalaway, 1985).

Technical coaching practices tend to inhibit collegiality and professional dialogue. For example, teachers frequently use clinical assessment forms to record the presence or absence of specific behaviors and the degree of thoroughness with which they are performed. The observer-coach of a concept attainment lesson might circle terms that best describe the teacher's behavior. To complete the assessment form, the observer must evaluate the adequacy of a teacher's decisions.

Because technical coaching gives the observer an evaluative function, there is a tendency for teachers to give each other "advice" or "constructive criticism." The requirement to evaluate also tends to intimidate novices who are working with veteran teachers.

Peer coaching may positively affect teachers' self-concept, work environment, and professional commitment if coaching strategies and procedures are practiced correctly. Collegial and challenge coaching probably do this better than technical coaching models. Most teachers lack opportunities for professional dialogue and are isolated from one another. Simply increasing the work-related communication between peers helps teachers' professional self-concept grow (Garmston, 1987).

Collegial coaching is a good choice for administrators wishing to affect school culture. Collegial coaching creates open professional dialogue, and helps teachers feel efficacious (Garmston, 1987). This style of coaching often grows from environments in which these dynamics are present. The school system itself becomes capable of change when teachers' professional dialogue increases.

Training is the largest single cost for schools using collegial coaching. An effective program trains teachers before they coach and provides follow-up training while the coaching is under way. A training program should help teachers refine coaching skills and identify practices that impede movement toward collegiality.

Whether coaching follows a technical, collegial, or challenge model, it brings fresh and important strategy to staff development. Showers (1985) stresses the idea that people master new skills best when they are placed in coaching situations. From the relationships of both teaching mastery and school culture, coaching helps make a school more effective.

Administrative Support Strategies for Peer Coaching

Administrators need to accept the responsibility of implementing the peer coaching program. To be sure that the positive effects of the coaching program develops, administrators need support strategies. Principals develop and maintain peer coaching in their schools in five ways.

Selecting a Coaching Model

The first and most critical action is selection of a coaching model that is most likely to produce desired

outcomes. Often principals involve their staffs in selecting the most appropriate coaching model. To choose between challenge, collegial, and technical coaching, principals must identify the outcomes they want to achieve and the resources they are willing to commit.

Each type of coaching model has its own strengths and weaknesses. Technical coaching is most effective for transferring teacher training to classroom application, but it requires a high number of costly classroom observations. Collegial coaching is best suited for promoting self-initiating teacher thought and improving the culture of the school. Training the coaches is the major cost of this model. Challenge coaching is most effective when solving instructional problems, but usually requires prior experience with one of the other models. Also, this coaching model is usually done by a subset of the staff and not with the entire faculty.

Value Peer Coaching

The manner in which principals demonstrate that they value peer coaching is a second way they support the program. They may do this by: (a) providing resources, (b) structuring coaching teams,

(c) acknowledging coaching practices, and (d) devoting staff meetings to coaching topics (Garmston, 1987).

Providing resources may include regularly providing substitutes for teachers who want to observe a colleague. Schools that can regularly employ substitutes usually have substantial peer coaching budgets. Schools that do not have money budgeted must find other alternatives that enable coaches and teachers to work together. Schools may also give teachers faculty meeting time to practice coaching skills. Teachers may help one another by taking a colleague's class so the released teacher can peer coach. Other schools give personal preparation credits to teachers who spend a certain amount of time peer coaching. Later, teachers can exchange the credits for a personal leave day (Garmston, 1987; Showers, 1985).

Principals make faculty members more aware of their common resources and problems by structuring coaching teams across departments or grade levels. This strategy is effective for improving school-wide understanding and culture, particularly in systems where some programs appear to be less highly valued than others. Although teachers usually prefer to structure their own coaching teams, some principals make the assignments. Principals should explain their

approach to teachers since teachers will interpret principal values according to how coaching teams are formed.

Administrators also show they value teachers' coaching work in personal ways. Asking a coach to explain the program to visitors, sending a personal note, or discussing teachers' and coaches' roles in a school newsletter are just a few methods administrators might use (Garmston, 1987; Showers, 1985).

Devoting staff meetings to coaching topics allows teachers and coaches to recognize that administrators value peer coaching. Some principals invite teachers to share coaching ideas in faculty meetings while others allow teachers to use time that is devoted to all-school meetings to discuss coaching (Garmston, 1987).

Provide Structure

A third method by which principals support peer coaching programs involves giving teachers a structure for gathering data and providing feedback, targeting a particular instructional content, and ensuring frequency of coaching. Providing a structure allows a teacher being observed to be specific in what the coach will focus on. A teacher feels they need to be involved with what the coach looks for, listens to, and

what data is gathered. This eliminates much of the anxiety teachers feel about having a colleague judge their work.

Providing a coaching focus is necessary to program success (Garmston, 1987). It is especially helpful for beginning coaches to structure a narrow observation focus for gathering and reporting data. Although technical coaching models often use clinical assessment forms to maintain a specific focus, teachers using collegial and challenge models select their own focus, agreeing between themselves what data collection techniques will be most useful and comfortable for the host teacher. In challenge coaching, teachers use the problem they are working on as the observation focus. After collecting the data, the information may be communicated to the observed teacher through mediative, technical, or evaluative feedback.

The coach providing mediative feedback gives descriptive reports and asks non-judgmental questions that cause the teacher to analyze and evaluate instructional decisions. In giving technical feedback, the coach tells the teacher which of the planned teaching behaviors were or were not used in the lesson. Often, when teachers first apply a new teaching methodology, they have trouble monitoring

their own behavior while also observing student reactions. A coach who can observe and give specific feedback regarding the presence or omission of teaching strategies is very useful (Garmston, 1987).

Coaching may also be focused by content. Some staffs set school-wide, grade, or department-level goals to improve teaching methodologies. A teaching strategy may also provide a content focus for coaching.

A principal focuses the coaching process by establishing expectations for frequency. In coaching, more is considered to be better. Ten to 15 coached practice sessions are desirable for teachers to reach a high level of skill in learning a moderately complex teaching activity over the long term. There are no simple formulas for how many collegial coaching sessions are required to change teacher norms about professional discourse, or the number of challenge coaching sessions needed to change attitudes about team collaborative problem solving (Showers, 1985).

Whatever the focus may be, the key to teacher satisfaction and learning and to program success is teacher ownership of the process. If a principal unilaterally were to determine a focus, teachers would be less likely to accept ownership. When teachers help in choosing a focus, their commitment increases

tremendously (Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Garmston, 1985, 1987; Lieberman & Miller, 1981).

Provide Training

Training in coaching is essential and is a fourth way principals support peer coaching. A little training is not enough. Good training uses the best available information about learning; provides theory for teachers, information, and demonstrations; focuses on teachers' concerns about giving and receiving feedback; and helps teachers develop and refine specific coaching skills. Follow-up workshops can help teachers improve and monitor coaching practices and solve problems that seem to arise (Showers, 1985).

Model Coaching

A fifth way principals support peer coaching is to model their willingness to be observed and to receive feedback. This communicates two powerful messages to teachers. It shows that principals value the coaching process and that they are willing to risk their own vulnerability as they learn.

One way principals can often model their openness to feedback by asking staff to evaluate faculty meetings. Other principals use surveys to learn how teachers perceive their performance. These surveys are then taken to faculty meetings and shared.

Principals may also model by their willingness to coach and be coached by shadowing another principal. In the shadowing program, a principal follows a colleague throughout a portion of the day, takes field notes, and then interviews the principal about decisions, activities, and behaviors. The observed principal discusses how his or her daily actions relate to goals and priorities of the school.

It is important that principals distinguish between their work with teachers as coaches and their work with teachers as evaluators. Principals can perform each function effectively when: (a) teachers are aware when they are being supervised versus evaluated, (b) the principals' behaviors are the same with the function they are performing, and (c) trust exists in the relationship (Costa & Garmston, 1986; Garmston, 1987).

Principals want teachers to respond to feedback about their teaching, to work towards self-awareness, to monitor and evaluate their decisions, and to improve themselves professionally. When modeling these behaviors themselves, principals take a giant step toward supporting teacher attainment of these goals.

Conclusion

Peer coaching programs help make educators aware of a different kind of professional accountability--not the accountability measured in a formal evaluation by a principal, but the kind that recognizes our responsibility for helping each other grow and improve. Peer coaching, if used correctly, may have numerous benefits for educators. Teachers will find new ways to work with colleagues in a formal setting that will help teachers learn self-awareness, self-evaluation, and improve their decision-making processes. Principals must support and be actively involved in peer coaching programs. When teachers see principals actively involved in the programs, they realize just how important the programs are.

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