



Coaches Need Coaches Too!



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- Jenna Keaney, BetterLesson Head of Coaching

Building Effective Coaches Requires Coaching

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ALLOW TIME FOR THE TRANSITION

Often, new instructional coaches were brought into their roles because they were identified as excellent classroom teachers. They have a formidable set of strategies and skills, they're well organized and understand learner-centered pedagogy, and they can push into classrooms and model their strategies effectively. But skilled teachers don't always know how to give focused, sustainable, actionable feedback to other adults.

Building this skill set is like learning any new trade -- it requires time, focused support, and continuous feedback. Effective coaches are well versed in adult learning theory, and they know how to give teachers feedback that produces a sustainable change in their instructional practice. This is an area where we actively support coaches at BetterLesson.

ESTABLISH SHARED UNDERSTANDING OF COACH'S ROLE

We first support these former teachers to define their coaching role -- not only in writing, but in the actions they take in the school community. This is especially important when teachers become coaches in schools where they were formerly teachers and where the role of an instructional coach had not previously been defined. Other teachers may view their new coach as an evaluator, or as the person who used to teach next door, and it can be challenging to build trust and credibility amid these preconceptions.

Beyond making the new role clear to teachers, the act of putting the job in writing serves to structure coach time in the most impactful way possible. Defining the role can start with answering the question, Who is the coach in the school to support? Some administrators believe a coach's primary role is to be a direct support to students, and should spend their time running interventions, looking at data, and co-teaching. But when coaches spend a tremendous amount of time getting assessment systems up and running, collecting data, and analyzing the data, it is extremely challenging to get into classrooms and support teachers to improve practice.

CREATE PROTECTED TIME FOR TEACHER OBSERVATION

Fundamentally, a coach should exist to support teachers to grow and learn, which in turn supports students in sustainable and impactful ways. Coaches need protected time to get into classrooms and meet with teachers, and when this dedicated time is written into the coach's job description, he or she can be held more accountable for shifting teacher practice. Instructional coaches can also support the work of analyzing data and organizing interventions and extensions, but big shifts can happen with teaching and learning when coaches are focused on supporting teachers.

DEVELOP A COLLABORATIVE OBSERVATION SYSTEM

Once the role of a coach is defined, we usually go through a process of setting up an observation system. Novice coaches tend to face several challenges with observations: they have trouble getting teachers to want them in their classrooms, they spend an unsustainable amount of time writing out their feedback, and they struggle to recommend strategies that are developmentally appropriate or truly impactful for each teacher. This means they might ask teachers to do something based on their own skill set, not the teacher's skill set, which might be too difficult for the teacher to make actionable.

A school coach can grow a positive culture for observation by making the process voluntary and collaborative. He or she can ask teachers: What's something you want me to come in and see that you're doing in your classroom? With teachers who are hesitant, the coach can offer to model at first and allow the teacher to give feedback, which allows the observation process to become reciprocal. The coach can also offer to help the teacher collect data on a new strategy they're trying, which will allow him or her to hear directly from students.

When a coach struggles to give actionable feedback, instructional leaders can recommend they pick just one thing to say to teachers. A teacher is better positioned to make a change when he or she receives one bite-sized nugget of feedback, especially when the coach emphasizes that it's the most important thing to try.

PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

For a new coach to grow, two things really need to be present: ongoing support and accountability. That's the balance we try to strike at BetterLesson. We support coaches to set individual goals in a safe space, and these coaches know they'll have our support as they work toward their goals. At the same time, they know we'll hold them accountable for their action steps. Without a one-on-one setting, accountability can be shared among multiple people, so growth is more difficult to measure.

Coaches often prioritize support for early career teachers, given how receptive and open these teachers are to feedback, but we really believe every teacher needs a coach. Our work with school coaches often supports them toward working with veteran teachers, and understanding that the role with a veteran teacher is different. A coach might be a strong thought partner without needing to be an expert in the veteran teacher's content area.

For a school or district coach to do his or job in the most effective way, ongoing feedback cannot be underestimated. That, paired with individualized support and accountability will start to build the system of collaboration and capacity-building leaders want to see in their schools.



Jenna Keaney joined BetterLesson in 2013 as a coach for the Master Teacher Project, working with ELA teachers to refine their Common Core aligned lessons. She has over fifteen years of experience as a teacher leader, literacy coach, literacy specialist, PLC facilitator, classroom teacher and collaborator on Massachusetts PARCC testing. Her work as a BetterLesson Coach allows her to help teachers develop their teaching craft and improve learning outcomes for all students