

Coaches Need Coaches: Shadow Coaching as Systematic Support for Coach Professional Learning

By Serena Tyra, Brandon Sherman, and Annela Teemant

Coaches play integral roles in many schools' learning cultures, but they often find their entry into coaching life disorienting and difficult. Educators typically take on the mantle of coach because they were successful as teachers, and they may have limited experiences working with adult learners. Yet, coaches we work with often point out that the shift from coach to teacher came without support structures and with an expectation that they would "learn on their feet."

New coaches rarely have the luxuries of formal preparation, assisted supervision, or ongoing support. Coaching preparation, where it exists at all, is rarely as extensive as the student teaching experience or apprenticeship model found in most teacher education programs. And unlike coaching for new teachers, coaching for new coaches is rare. Even where coaches do have access to more experienced coaches, such support is generally informal and closer to mentoring (Burkins & Ritchie, 2007). As one coach put it to us, "My title changed from teacher to coach, but no one showed me to how to coach."

For new coaches, having access to the support and assistance of more experienced coaches encourages efficacy and success, deepens learning, and helps boost morale in the face of a steep learning curve. This kind of ongoing professional learning and support structure is critical for growth and change.

Our model of coaching for coaches uses Shadow Coaching. In this approach, an experienced coach "shadows" new coaches in their interactions with teachers across one, and in some cases, two years, building in systematic support. Shadow Coaching provides an opportunity to provide ongoing and timely feedback, assistance, opportunities for reflection, and chances for new action in the very moment of coaching.

The quotes in this article are from our ongoing coaching research project supporting teachers and coaches in elementary schools in an urban school district in the midwestern United States. Individual and school names are pseudonyms. The coaching approach is not limited to a specific content area but is focused on developing dialogic and equitable classrooms.

Cycles of Shadow Coaching

"How did I learn how to coach? I read a lot of books, but that didn't prepare me for what coaching was really going to be like!" Danica Johnson, Crestwood Elementary

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In the Shadow Coaching process, an experienced coach works with a coach and a teacher dyad over the course of seven cycles in a school year. Each Shadow Coaching cycle includes a pre-observation conference, a classroom observation, and a post-observation conference. In each instance the coach engages with one teacher in reflection, dialogue, and growth. The Shadow Coach works with one coach-teacher pair. During this time, the coach also works with other teachers independently to practice and develop their coaching skills.

The Shadow Coach sits apart, being available but separate from the conversation. The Shadow Coach observes and may at times interject at critical points by asking questions, highlighting points of interest, or offering suggestions for possible next steps. The purpose of shadowed coaching cycles is to support reflection, sharing, and assistance that promote teacher and coach development.

In order for this triad to become successful, there must be trust. When done effectively, Shadow Coaching becomes a triad of trust and support among the teacher, the coach, and the Shadow Coach. Just as a coaching relationship built on trust can provide teachers with a safe space to be vulnerable and try new things, Shadow Coaching provides an opportunity for the supported coach to take risks, ask a variety of questions, or push a little more, knowing they have a support structure in place. In this way, Shadow Coaching is coaching “with a net.” One coach stated, “I was braver because I had someone to help me.”

The impact of the Shadow Coaching cycles with one teacher prepares the coach throughout the observed coaching cycle, but more importantly it helps the coach to develop the skills, mindset, and flexibility they will need when coaching all their teachers.

Key elements of Shadow Coaching include:

- Shared Pedagogical Targets
- Feedback and Reflection
- Clear Power Dynamics
- Systematic Cycles of Shadow Coaching
- Creating a Coaching Community

Shared Pedagogical Targets

“When I was a teacher, I thought everyone taught like I did. Now that I’m a coach, I realize that isn’t true!” Kennedy Stevens, Willow Elementary //Can we include the coaches’ names and schools with each of these quotes? //

One important solution is for teachers and coaches to have shared and clear pedagogical targets for coaching. Upon leaving the classroom, coaches often find

that what they thought was common practice and understanding of good teaching in all classrooms was actually specific to their classrooms. Coaches express surprise when confronted with the prevalence of teacher dominated instruction, deficit views of learners, and dated theories of teaching and learning. Faced with the prospect of coaching teachers with such differing belief structures and views of learning, coaches can become overwhelmed by the options and possible pedagogical paths.

Figure 1 highlights the Enduring Principles for Learning (Teemant, 2018) we use in our Shadow Coaching model as shared pedagogical targets of good teaching. This framework is an augmentation of the Standards of Effective Pedagogy (McClure, 2008; Tharp et al., 2000), a set of principles based on wide-ranging research and sociocultural principles and pedagogy. It has been employed in Pre-K through university settings throughout the world. The framework is meant to inform professional learning and address educational inequities. United by these overarching principles, coaches and teachers are able to focus their coaching cycles on appropriate and effective application of principles of learning in daily classroom practice.

Although there are shared pedagogical targets and a common vocabulary between coach and teacher, there is not a single way to either coach or teach based on these principles of learning. Pedagogical targets, therefore, give teachers and coaches a shared experience with enough flexibility to allow every coach and teacher to have their own journey towards those targets.

For their part, Shadow Coaches are able to help new coaches reflect on shared pedagogical targets, reconcile them with the variety of approaches, philosophies, perspectives, preferences, and classroom realities teachers can represent. They also help navigate starting points for ongoing coaching conversations around pedagogy.

Feedback and Support to Develop A Coaching Identity

“Feedback was hard to get at first, but I found out that it was the most important part of the coaching process. I learned more about myself, and I changed as a coach.”

Andrew Matthews, Hillside Elementary

Feedback and support are a critical part of the Shadow Coaching process. If coaching is a process built on reflection, dialogue, and interaction between individuals who are dedicated to growth, action, and change, then coaches need to engage in those activities with other coaches as well.

In addition to having coaching sessions shadowed, the Shadow Coach and coach debrief after each part of the coaching cycle and reflect on the teacher/coach conversations. At each point along the way, the Shadow Coach meets with the coach to debrief in real time, providing feedback, support, posing questions, and creating

space to reflect. In this way, the Shadow Coaching relationship mirrors what is occurring between the coach and teacher.

This is critical not only for honing new coaches' skills and abilities but for helping them develop their identities as coaches. The reflective conversations allow coaches to develop an idea of who they are as coaches, who they want to become, what actions they want to take, and how they want to develop themselves as coaches. One coach shared that during these debriefs, "I was more concerned about being liked than being a coach. I couldn't be the coach I wanted to be and keep worrying about if my teachers like me."

This process also provides coaches with a chance to articulate and question their assumptions about coaching and teacher learning. Another coach stated, "I realized I wasn't helping anyone by asking the easy questions. I don't want to be that kind of coach."

Clear Power Dynamics

"When I started the Shadow coaching, I worried about what the Shadow Coach might say or think about my coaching. I wondered if I was doing it wrong. After working with the Shadow Coach, I know we are working towards the same goal and that we really are doing this together." Katrina Watkins, Canyon Elementary

One tension often present in the relationship between teachers and coaches is that of power. As hard as coaches might try to position themselves otherwise, they often find that teachers defer to them as the expert or authority. This tendency is something Shadow Coaches need to be wary of as well. Shadow Coaches do provide feedback from a position of experience and expertise but should avoid allowing the new coach to elevate them to a position of unquestioned authority. Shadow Coaching doesn't mean coaches work in the shadow of the more experienced coach. Rather, it is the more experienced coach that stays in the shadow of the coach/teacher relationship. The Shadow Coach's goal is to cultivate reflection and growth, not dependency.

Creating a Coaching Community

"I didn't realize how lonely coaching would be. I'm no longer a teacher, and I'm not an administrator. I don't fit in anymore." Layla Garrett, Wildwind Elementary

Having left a teaching community that might have included grade level, department, or content teams, coaches may find they are now a one-of-a-kind professional in their building. One coach lamented, "I used to have a team of colleagues to talk to. Now, I'm the only coach in the building, and I don't think people even understand what I do."

A critical part of the Shadow Coaching experience is the development of a coaching community. The Shadow Coach and coach are a community of two that can sustain each other through the early trials of coaching. In the next stage of the work, the individual growth made in the Shadow Coach-coach-teacher triads is maximized when multiple coaches meet with the shadow coach to share triumphs and struggles with others who truly understand the work because of their shared roles, pedagogical targets, and lived experiences. In this setting, the Shadow Coach is able to focus on shared concerns to reinforce learning. For example, the community of coaches may benefit from a focus on intentional questioning, meaningful walkthroughs with principals, developing students as critical thinkers, or the difference between coaching to teach vs. coaching to learn. These group meetings become a balance between new learning and reflection on experience that build an extended network of colleagues in the coaching community.

Everyone Needs a Coach

"I am a better coach because I have a coach, and other coaches help me reflect on what I do as coach. Without them, I would be stuck, doing the same thing I always did and not knowing how to change." Terri Samuels, Sunset Elementary

Coaches have the potential to influence the pedagogy of every teacher within their sphere of influence. It is a powerful role, and coaches must be supported, guided, and encouraged to grow and learn if they are to reach their full potential. For teachers, the strength of coaching is found in the reflective conversations, the planning and support of teaching and learning, and the influence of daily practices in classrooms. Coaches deserve parallel support from coaches of their own—Shadow Coaches—to engage in this type of work. Coaching is too important, too critical for the growth of school communities, teacher learning, and student success to ignore the ongoing development of the coach.

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ENDURING PRICIPLES OF LEARNING

STANDARD 1

Joint Productive Activity (JPA) Teacher and Students Producing Together

Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teacher and students.

Enacting Level: The teacher and a small group of students collaborate on a shared product.

STANDARD 2

Language & Literacy Development (LLD) Developing Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum

Develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction across the curriculum.

Enacting Level: The teacher provides structured opportunities for students to engage in sustained reading, writing, or speaking activities; and assists academic language use or literacy development by questioning, rephrasing, or modeling.

STANDARD 3

Contextualization (CTX) Making Meaning: Connecting School to Students' Lives

Connect teaching and curriculum to experiences and skills of students' home and community.

Enacting Level: The teacher integrates the new activity/information with what students already know from home, school, or community.

STANDARD 4

Challenging Activities (CA) Teaching Complex Thinking

Challenge students toward cognitive complexity.

Enacting Level: The teacher designs and enacts challenging activities with clear standards and performance feedback, and assists the development of more complex thinking.

STANDARD 5

Instructional Conversation (IC) Teaching Through Conversation

Engage students through dialogue, especially the Instructional Conversation.

Enacting Level: The teacher has a planned, goal-directed conversation with a small group of students on an academic topic; elicits student talk by questioning, listening, and responding to assess and assist student understanding; and inquires about students' views, judgments, or rationales. Student talk occurs at higher rates than teacher talk.

STANDARD 6

Critical Stance (CS) Teaching to Transform Inequities

Empower students to transform society's inequities through democracy and civic engagement.

Enacting Level: The teacher consciously engages learners in interrogating conventional wisdom and practices, reflecting upon ramifications, and seeking actively to transform inequities within their scope of influence in the classroom and larger community.

PARTNERING FOR RADICAL TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLING

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ENGAGING WITH
PEDAGOGY

*Figure 1: Enduring Principles of Learning as Shared Pedagogical Targets for Coaching
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Our designer needs to redo it to match our design style, and it reduces the chance of
error if she has the text and doesn't have to copy it over herself.//*