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DIGGING **DEEPER**

Unearthing the roots of teacher resistance to instructional coaching

By **Sloane A. Castleman**

One of the most exciting trends over the past decade in education and professional development has been the movement away from isolated, one-shot workshops and toward instructional coaching, a form of professional development that offers teachers growth opportunities embedded in the workplace, relevant to the specific needs of each learning and teaching community, and sustained over time.

The research correlating the work instructional coaches do to student achievement and teacher improvement is very encouraging. But not all teachers are open to partnering with an instructional coach.

Two years ago, I made the decision to explore this issue in greater depth. As a reading specialist and instructional coach, I wanted to have a better understanding of the factors that contribute to teacher resistance. The results of that study reflect the continued relevance of the work of Malcolm Knowles, who is best known for his seminal work in the area of andragogy.

What is andragogy?

Simply put, andragogy is the study of how adults learn. It is based on the premise that an adult's readiness to learn and sources of motivation are different from a child's and, as such, our approach to supporting adult learners should also be different. Knowles's research led him to develop key principles related to adult learning:

- Adults have a deep need to be self-directed.
- Their life experience is a vast resource for learning.
- Their readiness to learn is heavily influenced by their need to meet the demands of their social roles.
- They prefer learning opportunities that address immediate problems.
- They are intrinsically motivated.

As I slowly sifted through reams of interview and focus group transcripts, I finally came to the realization that teachers resist initiatives that are inconsistent with these principles. In other words, when school leaders act in a way which conflicts with the inherent needs of adult learners, they lose their support and engagement.

Four lessons learned

1. To start, instructional coaches need to understand that the work they do is entirely *relational*. We all know good relationships are based on *mutual respect*. The same holds true in a coaching relationship.

Instructional coaches need to demonstrate humility and a genuine respect for the knowledge, experience, and abilities of others. In a field that is complex and constantly evolving, instructional coaches should resist the temptation to tell their colleagues what is best and should cultivate collegial conversations and collaborative explorations into best practices.

This approach honors the capabilities of others and allows them to move toward self-actualization in a way that resonates with the needs of adult learners.

2. Similarly, instructional coaches need to understand the importance of establishing relationships based on *trust*. This may seem obvious, but earning and maintaining the trust of teachers is not easy.

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Instructional coaches bridge the gap between teachers and administrators, both of whom rely on them to inform decision-making. Although this design has many benefits, it can leave teachers feeling vulnerable. Numerous participants in my study cited the issue of trust as a significant factor in determining the quality of their relationship with their instructional coach. Those who had positive experiences explained that they felt they could expose their weaknesses and get help because they trusted their coach. Those who were openly resistant cited a lack of trust.

Their fears are not unfounded; there are administrators who turn to instructional coaches to help them make building-level decisions. Administrators need to understand that instructional coaches have to put the best interests of teachers first. If teachers can't trust their instructional coaches, coaches can't help teachers learn from their mistakes and take important professional risks.

3. Furthermore, instructional coaches need to involve teachers in *decision-making* related to their professional development. Involving teachers has long been acknowledged as central to developing a shared commitment among stakeholders. But this is an example of the gap that sometimes exists between theory and practice.

The participants in my study talked about the fact that instructional coaches and administrators often made decisions about professional development behind closed doors. If we know that adults need to be self-directing and prefer learning opportunities that address immediate and pressing problems, then we need to involve them in planning sessions.

4. Finally, instructional coaches need to cultivate *collaborative learning opportunities*. If we know that the greatest resource for adult learning resides in their diverse life experiences, then it is critical that teachers be given

time to share their experiences with one another.

Although we have certainly made strides over the past decade to break down the isolation of classroom life, teachers continue to miss out on opportunities to learn from one another. Instructional coaches have to look for creative ways to connect teachers so they can learn to take action as a community.

If I've learned anything over the past year, it is that the first step to making sense of teacher resistance is to ask the question: *What am I doing that's conflicting with the developmental needs of adult learners?*

As instructional coaches, our job is to cultivate positive relationships that connect teachers and engage them in the process of meeting personal, grade-level, and organizational goals.

Only when instructional coaches are cognizant of the developmental needs of adult learners can they really make a difference in the lives of students and teachers alike. ■

Defining Roles

ILA released a new position statement and research brief that provide school administrators with guidance on how to define the roles of *reading/literacy specialists*, *literacy coaches*, and *literacy coordinators/supervisors*. The descriptions aim to help those hiring school-based specialized literacy professionals to better understand what skill set is required and which qualifications to look for in the hiring process. Further, the definitions support teaching programs in developing curricula to better prepare teachers for these specific positions. For more information, visit literacyworldwide.org/definingroles.