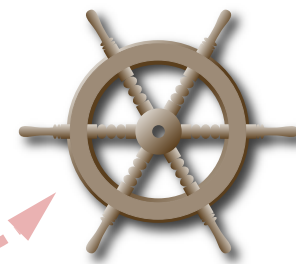


# Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



## What Belongs in Our Coach's Corner

by Ron Brunton, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Initiatives



I want to begin this article by emphasizing the exceptional quality of teaching, administration and the public school program here in Nova Scotia. Regardless the measurement instrument, public education provided to the children and youth of our province is superb. But that does not mean there are no challenges. We know there are students we fail to reach and even communities struggling with the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century life and the need to acquire the necessary tools to benefit from our society. The key to realizing those benefits is education and as educators we know that education is a process and a journey, not a product or a destination.

What is true for our students is equally true for ourselves. We benefit from public education and we support student learning best when we are able to engage in our own learning. Professional learning is our key to maintaining our excellence, repeatedly revitalizing our practice, enjoying our teaching and students, and providing the support they need in their journey. Unfortunately, the pressures of our jobs frequently makes finding the time and the means of professional learning very difficult.

A multi-partner committee that included voices from classroom teachers, school-based

administrators, school board central office staff, the Department of Education, the university teacher education sector and the NSTU developed the Education Professional Development Report. One of the principles framing the recommendations for Theme 1, *Leadership for Effective Instruction and Student Learning*, is that "Every teacher benefits from engagement with an instructional coach/mentor and engaging with a coach is expected of every teacher to support their individual development."<sup>1</sup> This principle is embedded in the curriculum of the new Nova Scotia Instructional Leadership Program.

In order to realize the promise of coaching and mentoring, however, we need to understand what good coaching is and is not and we need to put that understanding into practice.

First and foremost, coaching must be clearly separate from evaluation. Coaching is a component of professional learning and development. It provides an external view of our practice to help us see and understand what we are doing. We can all benefit from additional perspectives. If coaching and evaluation are linked, however, coaching is transformed into a remediation strategy; coaching becomes a consequence of a poor evaluation or a data source for evaluation. This link compromises the learning potential of coaching. Properly done, coaching encourages everyone within the school community to grow.

Properly done, coaching addresses five crucial concerns – the five Cs. The coach must focus on **consciousness** and thereby endeavour to increase the self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-monitoring by teachers. The coach must build a high trust **connection** with the teacher that frees the teacher to take on new challenges because she/he knows it's safe to do so. The coach must acknowledge and appreciate the teacher's current level of **competence**. Nova Scotia teachers have gone through one of the most demanding teacher education and certification systems in the world and are subject to regular and periodic evaluation. Therefore, although we can always learn, competence can be justifiably assumed.

The coach must recognize that the teacher's motivation is to **contribute** to students' success and the general welfare of our province and country. Finally, the coach must release the teacher's **creativity**, with the understanding that creativity can never be coerced; it can only be invited.<sup>2</sup>

In order to implement the 5 Cs, a coach must be teacher centred. The focus is on helping the teacher identify her/his own strengths and challenges. The coach's expertise is not what should be on display. The coach must have a no-fault approach. This contrasts to a high-stakes approach that is evaluation. Instead, the focus is reducing defensiveness and increasing teacher engagement in professional development. The coach must focus on teachers' strengths, not weaknesses. We know that people are much more effective learners if they build and expand on what they do well rather than focusing primarily on areas of weakness.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, there must be a partnership between teacher and coach. Partnerships are built on equality, choice, voice, reflection, dialogue, application and reciprocity. "In a true partnership, one partner does not tell the other what to do; both partners share ideas and make decisions as equals."<sup>4</sup> Coaches must ensure that teachers can make the decisions that affect them; their goals, practices and the interpretation of evidence. Teachers must feel free to express both their excitement and their concerns. Teachers' opinions matter, their voice must be heard. Teachers must have the opportunity to reflect on what takes place in their classrooms and within the teacher-coach experience. The teacher

and coach should be co-creating the ideas they develop around effective practice.

Coaches and teachers must engage in dialogue whereby neither one is trying to ensure their view "wins". The interaction is focused on problem-solving where each partner contributes and they work together through a discussion. As partners they need to work together to apply the change strategies they have discussed. They need to develop a plan on how to incorporate new approaches into the classroom setting and not leave it to the teacher by her/himself to figure out how to transform "theory" into classroom practice.

Finally, both coach and teacher should be learning. It is not a one-way process in which the coach "knows" and the teacher "learns." Just as we can learn from our students, a good coach learns from the teachers with whom she works.<sup>5</sup>

Coaching has the potential to be an exciting process for professional learning for everyone, with our students being the ultimate beneficiaries. Many of us have seen so-called coaches that violate the principles articulated here. Inevitably, the result has been anger, frustration, demoralization and a basic resistance to change; the classic no-win situation. Coaching that adheres to these principles enables and empowers teachers, it recognizes their professional capacity and energizes them to expand their horizons and contribute new ideas and approaches in the classroom; the classic win-win situation. This is the only approach that makes sense and the only one capable of achieving positive results.

- 1 Report and Recommendations of the Education Professional Development Committee, September 2009, page 42
- 2 The Coach and the Evaluator, Tschannen-Moran, Bob and Tschannen-Moran, Megan, Educational Leadership, October 2011, ASCD publication ([www.ascd.org](http://www.ascd.org)), pp13-14
- 3 Ibid. p. 15
- 4 What Good Coaches Do, Knight, Jim, Educational Leadership, October 2011, p. 18
- 5 Ibid. pp 18-21

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