

What is Peer Coaching?

Peer coaching is an interactive process between two or more teaching professionals that is used to:

- share successful practices through collaboration and reflective practice
- act as a problem-solving vehicle
- reduce isolation among teachers
- create a forum for addressing instructional problems
- support and assisting new teachers in their practice
- build collaborative norms to enable teachers to give and receive ideas and assistance

Peer coaching can bring about a better understanding of best practices, and better articulated curriculum. Peer coaching has contributed to an overall improvement in teaching and learning in the schools (Becker, 2000).

Peer coaching also provides a mechanism through which teachers can gain deeper insight from workshops. Having a peer coach allows a teacher to try out new strategies learned in a workshop and get feedback on how these strategies worked in the classroom. Peer coaching also helps teachers to internalize what they've learned and to apply it in their own classroom, and then take part in professional discussion about it. This type of follow-up helps ensure transfer of learning. It also helps teacher to share new ideas and strategies with one another.

Robert Garmston, an educator, researcher, and co-developer of the Cognitive Coaching SM model (a type of peer coaching), says in *Peer Coaching: An Effective Staff Development Model For Educators Of Linguistically And Culturally Diverse Students* that "peer Coaching can further a teacher's individual professional development, for improving school climate.

Collegial Coaching

One model for peer coaching is the *collegial coaching model*.

Collegial peer coaching consists of three basic parts:

- a pre-conference
- an observation
- a post-conference.

During the **pre-conference**, teachers meet and discuss the elements that the teacher being observed wants to focus on. They discuss the specific lesson planned, its context, and other relevant factors that influence student outcomes. The peer coach is responsible only for providing that teacher with another perspective of the learning environment so they can mutually improve teaching and learning.

Next, the peer coach **observes** in the teacher's classroom as an collegial observer. The coach should focus on what the person has identified as their area of focus or need.

Finally, the peer coach schedules a **post-conference**, to discuss the outcome of the lesson. This is a collegial discussion. The observed teacher should take the lead in this conversation, with the observer adding factual information about what happened during the lesson. They may discuss what worked well, what didn't work at all, and what could be changed or improved to have a positive impact on the teaching and learning in the classroom. Important aspects of this stage are

- The observed teacher is in control of the lesson.
- The emphasis is on reflection on what has happened during the lesson and analysis of its impact on student learning.

Please be aware that collegial peer coaching is not.

1. It is **not one teacher acting as an expert** and the other a novice or apprentice. Both teachers should together as equals who are looking to collaboratively improve their teaching skills.
2. It is **not based on evaluating and judging** performance. This is a system for continual improvement and growth for both educators.
3. It is **not just a process for initiating new teachers into the profession**. Instead, it should have a positive impact on all teachers no matter of how long they have been in the profession or what their background may be.
4. It is not intended to be part of an evaluation process. Instead, it should be used to foster a focus on continual improvement in teaching and learning.

Collegial coaching, is built on a trusting relationship between a pair of teachers that is designed to be noncompetitive and mutually respectful focused on the continual improvement their teaching methods.

Pam Robbins, author of the ASCD publication *How to Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program*, discusses a type of peer coaching that “involves two or more colleagues working together around the shared observation of teaching.” In her description, Pam notes that the teacher being observed is responsible for setting the focus of the coaching session:

- his or her expectations for what is to be observed
- how data about that topic will be collected
- how the observing teacher will interact within the classroom.

These three elements are critical to the success of a collegial coaching program because it allows teachers to refine teaching practices, think critically about their teaching practices, and improve engage in ongoing professional dialog. The coach in this model does not need to be a subject area expert. It is important, however that the coach possess skills such as:

- questioning
- observation
- conversation
- facilitation

Collegial coaches help each other reflect on their own teaching practices without passing judgment or making evaluations about their observations.

Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback includes providing your partner with descriptive, specific information that is focused on changing behaviors. Karen Irmsher recommends the following techniques:

- Focus on describing observable behavior without attaching judgment, accusations, or generalizations to those behaviors
- Give timely feedback. Immediate feedback is usually desirable, but it is best to gauge a person's readiness to receive the feedback and the appropriateness of the time and situation.
- Paraphrase when possible to clarify what the teacher meant to communicate as well as demonstrating what he or she gleaned from the conversation or observation. The following statements are good paraphrasing sentence starters:
 - _ What I hear you saying is...
 - _ Tell me what you mean when you...
 - _ Do I understand correctly that you mean...?

Listening Skills

Listening means hearing and understanding what you are being told. It does NOT mean giving advice, adding detail, or even sharing your own experiences. The peer coach's job is to guide the teacher into reflective thought about his or her own teaching practice. Consider the following:

- What kind of body language do you display when you listen? Does your body face toward the speaker? Do you make eye contact?
- Do you interact with the speaker by echoing their words or nodding/shaking your head?
- Do you ask appropriate questions to help clarify or expand on their thoughts and ideas?

Open-Ended Questions

When peer coaching instead of asking closed-ended questions that can be responded to with a simple "yes" or "no," try using questions that begin with "how" or "what" to open up your conversations such as:

- How did you feel the lesson that you taught today went?
- What do you think would happen if...?
- What might you see happening in your classroom if...?