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Kenneasha Sloley, standing, observes Kathryn Cavicchi as she works with children at Dr. Michael D. Fox School in Hartford, Connecticut.

# WHAT A QUESTION CAN ACCOMPLISH

ASKING  
THE RIGHT  
QUESTIONS  
CAN BUILD  
PRINCIPALS'  
PROBLEM-  
SOLVING  
SKILLS

BY ISOBEL STEVENSON

It was the third day of the LEAD Connecticut Summer Institute for Turnaround Principals, a two-week workshop for new principals of low-achieving schools. One of the participants, Kenneasha Sloley, came in late, not exactly flustered but not looking very happy. When there was a break, her coach asked her how things were going, and she talked about how frustrated she was. Summer school was going on in her building, and she had made a promise to herself that she was going to check in with all the teachers every morning to let them know that she was supporting them, even though she was going to be at the workshop most days.

But this morning, other administrative trivia had gotten in the way, and not only was she late to the workshop, she also hadn't had the chance to make her early morning rounds of the classrooms. She felt that she had already broken a commitment, and it was only her fourth day on the job. Her coach asked her, "What other ways could you show them that you're there for them even when you're not in the building?"

A few days later, Sloley texted her coach with thanks for asking the question. After thinking about alternative ways to meet her goal, she had asked her secretary to deliver a

note of appreciation to all the teachers, and when she got back to her office the next day, there were many thank-you notes, and even flowers, on her desk. She recognized that she had been thinking that there was only one way to accomplish the goal that she had set for herself and was grateful for being prompted to challenge that assumption and find other paths that worked just as well, and maybe better.

On the one hand, this was an exceedingly small incident. And yet, it sums up the power of coaching. Asking the right question at the right time affords the possibility that there is another way to approach an issue, thereby building that person's capacity to solve not just the problem right in front of her, but future ones, too. As with most things that look simple, there is a lot of thinking and skill behind it.

At the Connecticut Center for School Change, we have been working for several years to provide timely, effective, research-based coaching to principals, particularly those who are new to their role in relatively low-performing schools and districts. We have been studying our efforts with the help of an expert external evaluator, and we can affirm that coaching is a powerful intervention for building the capacity of principals (Birkeland, Kent, & Sherer, 2015).

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Principals tell us that it challenges their assumptions, helps them build techniques for immediate use and strategies for long term growth, builds their self-efficacy, and provides time for them to reflect and learn from their experiences.

#### **WHY COACHING FOR PRINCIPALS?**

Most of the coaching that we provide to principals is part of a suite of services that includes other professional learning, such as a regular community of practice or the summer institute mentioned above. These opportunities provide content knowledge about what effective principals do and what powerful instructional leadership looks like.

Knowing what to do is obviously crucial, but these practices are extremely difficult to implement well because each principal's situation is complex and unique, and implementation is even more challenging for someone new to the principal position. Knowing what to do is simply not enough. Actually doing it is constrained by many factors, such as lack of confidence that a strategy can be employed effectively or

a mental model that fools the principal into thinking that there is nothing to be done in a given situation. A coach can help in many ways.

The primary benefit of coaching is that when it is done well, it is the ultimate in individualized support for planning, action, and reflection. The role of the coach is to support the thinking of the principal as he strategizes, takes action, measures impact, and processes his learning. And like any other scaffold, the goal is to provide assistance while developing the capacity of the principal to do the work of leading a school. The coach is trying to work himself out of a job.

### **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF QUESTIONS IN A STRONG PRINCIPAL-COACH PARTNERSHIP?**

At the Connecticut Center for School Change, our coaching of principals is grounded in their daily work because experience is the most powerful teacher and, therefore, we learn by doing. Our coaching is focused on clarifying the goals of principals, helping them self-assess where they are in relation to those goals and helping them create strategies for getting from where they are to where they want to be. While doing that, coaches listen for, and challenge, assumptions and mental models that shut down possibilities and provide safe spaces for principals to think out loud and even role-play.

Most of this work happens through the asking of questions. Asking questions is a nuanced and difficult skill to master, with the coach having to decide, sometimes many times during a coaching session, two things: first, whether to ask a question, and second, what question to ask. For example, instead of asking a question in response to a statement by a principal, a coach may express sympathy, restate what the principal said, state an opinion or judgment, give advice, or say nothing.

Sometimes, saying nothing can be the most powerful coaching move of all.

And if the coach decides to ask a question, what should the question be? The coach may ask for clarification or more information, probe for evidence behind the principal's statement, ask the principal to generate options for action, ask the principal to make a connection to mission and vision, query an interpretation, ask the principal to explain her reasoning — or many other possibilities.

Through the work of the external evaluator, we know that all these types of questions are being asked. We also know that there is tension around the asking of questions. Coaches feel this tension and struggle to determine when to ask a principal a question and when to make a suggestion. Obviously, if the principal does not know whom to call about services for a homeless student, it does no good to ask, "Well, have you thought about what your options are?"

Sometimes, however, the choice between asking and telling is not so clear-cut, especially when the coach believes that the principal is capable of generating a better solution than the coach can offer, but the principal is tired and frustrated and just wants someone to tell him what to do.

Sometimes the coach believes that the principal simply does not have the knowledge or skill to finesse a tricky situation without input from an experienced administrator. As one coach asked rhetorically: "You go into a school where there's been a huge fight. The principal's in total stress mode. What's the most helpful approach that day or for that hour?" Who would question that coach's judgment that the best thing to do was to step in and help?

Principals also feel this tension. They report valuing their coach's approach to their learning because it forces them to think about what they are doing and why they are doing

it. This is often in contrast to their experience of being given advice that, especially when it comes from their supervisor, may communicate to principals that their superiors have little faith in their knowledge and judgment.

As one principal told us, "The fact that my coach is not telling me what to do all the time has boosted my confidence. I like that because I have a supervisor who just tells you everything that she thinks you need to do. It can be very overwhelming. Sometimes you feel as though the people above you don't have any faith in what you can do."

At the same time, the principals are aware that their coaches were former administrators, and they worry that they are losing out if their coaches don't give them advice. As the external evaluator summarized: "Much as they praised their coaches' efforts to get them to think for themselves, the principals also valued their coaches' advice, opinions, and technical assistance. Nearly all of the principals in the sample described specific times when the coach helped them solve a problem, shared an example from their own practice, pointed out something they had not noticed, or taught them how to do something they did not previously know how to do. They widely expressed their appreciation for such direct, immediate help."

Knowing when to tell and when to keep pushing forward with questioning and, crucially, how to change that balance as time goes on and the principal acquires more skill and judgment may be what differentiates the good coaches from the truly great ones.

An experienced coach employs a diagnostic process in any given coaching situation including, but not limited to, the following steps:

- Does the principal know enough? It is important not to give into the assumption that she does not, perhaps by asking her.

- Is she making assumptions about what she can and cannot do? Ask her.
- Is her proposed course of action likely to get her the result she's looking for? Ask her to explain her thinking.
- Is it possible that she's thinking of doing something unwise? The coach has to be humble enough to know that just because he knows what he would do, that does not mean that the principal is automatically wrong when she wants to do something different.

And if the coach, in all humility, still has doubts, he can be direct without being directive. There is a difference between stating a concern and telling someone what to do. Is the principal stuck? The coach can provide ways of thinking about a problem. Is she worried that she doesn't have the skills to do what she needs to do? Offer to help her prepare. The coach may very well give the principal advice and suggestions, but asking questions is a very good place to start.

### A WORD ABOUT TRUST

People become defensive when they perceive that they are somehow at risk — sometimes they just fear embarrassment, sometimes they worry about their job. Safe environments allow people to hear feedback, think about themselves and their contributions to the challenges they face, and consider alternative interpretations and courses of action.

Learning only happens when there is safety. Coaches, therefore, are careful to make sure that they build strong, trusting relationships in which principals know that they can tell their coaches about their problems and failures without fear that their mistakes will be held against them. The principals described here all believed that their

coaches had their best interests at heart, and that formed the bedrock for all the other work that was done.

### IMPLICATIONS

Evaluating the impact of coaching by asking principals what has been most beneficial to them puts their professional learning needs in the spotlight and results in a trove of actionable information. It has given coaches insight into what makes a difference to principals; it has affirmed the power of listening, of framing strategic questions, and of the close connection between principals and their coaches.

Further, the thoughtful stories and analyses that principals have shared have validated that coaching has had a profound impact on their perceived self-efficacy. The principals feel so much better equipped to approach the challenges of the job having had a coach.

Above all else, coaches need to pay close attention to diagnosing when principals need concrete information, when they need ways to think about problems, and when they will most benefit from questions that challenge their assumptions or help them plan school improvement.

The decisions coaches make about when to ask questions and what questions to ask have implications for the skill development of principals and for the relationships they have with principals. The diagnosis of what a principal needs from a coach in any given moment is a tough skill to master.

The implications of what principals say about their professional learning go beyond coaching. Many districts have rewritten the expectations for principal supervisors in order to create supportive partnerships with principals. Those principal supervisors should be aware that when they give advice and feedback, their attempts at being helpful may not always be perceived as such.

Principals express strong

appreciation for questions and feedback that challenge their thinking without assuming that they don't know enough. At the same time, shifting to an approach to building the capacity of principals that leans more heavily on asking questions presents challenges for even trained coaches, and principal supervisors may themselves need some support in making that change.

Likewise, those responsible for designing professional development for principals should bear in mind that putting new ideas into practice is extremely challenging for principals, who operate on a public stage and often do not get the chance to rehearse.

Designing embedded opportunities for them to prepare, practice, and revise as regular components of their work lives could be invaluable as they try to implement initiatives. In addition to coaching, other professional learning opportunities, such as leadership communities of practice, might allow principals to provide much of the same support as they get from coaching to each other.

Whether principals get support for their professional learning from supervisors, coaches, or peers, it is clear that being asked powerful questions by someone who has the principals' success in the forefront of his or her mind has tremendous power for deepening the learning of principals and reinforcing their skills and their confidence.

### REFERENCES

**Birkeland, S., Kent, O., & Sherer, D. (2015).** *What do the coaches do? What is the value of what they do? Findings from a study of LEAD Connecticut's Executive Coaching.* Newtown, MA: Helix Learning Partners.

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