

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL STAFF THROUGH Coaching

BY CLARENCE U. DUNBEBIN

Around the world, but especially in the United States, employers and employees are joining in cooperative ventures to strengthen the professional contributions of staff members. This, coupled with a scarcity of potential employees in organizations such as colleges and schools, makes it imperative for administration to create programs that help employees develop their potential to the fullest. Many of these organizations are turning to coaching as one solution.

What Is Coaching?

“Coaching is the process by which employees gain the skills, abilities, and knowledge they need to develop themselves professionally and become more effective in their jobs.”¹ It is a friendly method for working with employees who wish to enhance their present skills or for those who may lack essential skills and motivation. In many instances, employees are seeking out coaches themselves or are asking their supervisors to assign coaches to help them develop and carry out professional improvement goals.²

The coaching fundamentals include:

1. Setting goals that help people to achieve their best;
2. Eliciting internal commitment, motivation, and self-directed learning;
3. Creating a successful theory of action;³
4. Practicing the fundamentals of their job description;
5. Observing breakdowns and helping the employee correct the problem;
6. Providing feedback that contributes to employee advancement; and
7. Teaching new skills and capabilities.⁴

Who Can Benefit From Coaching?

At least four types of employees can benefit from the

coaching process: newly hired teachers or administrators, isolated employees such as those in one- and two-teacher schools, teachers and administrators who may be in trouble, and those who want to grow and expand their skills.

Who Should Serve as a Coach?

Members of three categories of professional educators can best serve as coaches: the superintendent of schools, the principal, and another teacher. Their job description is not nearly as important as their willingness to help and to be trained as coaches.

Elizabeth A. McAllister and Gloria A. Neubert surveyed the literature on peer coaching and found that it was virtually unanimous in declaring that “coaching, appropriately used, is a highly successful method for helping teachers apply new skills.”⁵ They have applied this finding to their peer-coaching program for pre-service teachers at Towson State University in Maryland. In the program, student teachers are taught to coach each other and to interact with in-service teachers in coaching roles.

“Teaching is typically a solitary act. During peer coaching, peers provide affirmation that can reduce the disequilibrium and loneliness associated with trying to apply a new skill. This positive attitude is particularly evident when the in-service teachers’ coaching situation is set up as reciprocal coaching, as opposed to one-way coaching. In reciprocal coaching, a pair of teachers alternate roles—coaching, and being coached by, each other.”⁶

The professional experiences of many Adventist teachers, who perform their ministry in small, scattered schools, are

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similar to those described by McAllister. A coach who regularly spends time encouraging and helping new or isolated teachers can be a godsend.

What Do Coaches Do?

Coaches have at least seven responsibilities:

1. *They serve as role models*, encouraging higher performance by the staff members they coach.
2. *They help to create a work culture* that allows staff to

become motivated.

3. *They clarify organizational expectations*, including the micro-expectations of the staff member's job and the macro-objectives related to the school's overall strategy and mission.

4. *They provide feedback* to help staff members perform their jobs more effectively.

5. *They use performance evaluation as a developmental aid* and a measurement tool.

6. *They provide the training and resources* that staff members need to improve their performance.

7. *They praise, praise, and praise some more* to reinforce staff members' positive performance.⁷

How Do Coaches Achieve These Goals?

Keeping these goals in mind, successful coaches help foster a school climate that encourages free and open exchanges between staff and administration. Such a climate makes the coach's role much easier and provides a greater likelihood of success. The aim is to create an energizing environment that motivates staff members to be the best they can become.⁸

A positive climate contains at least the following eight elements:

1. *Administrators and coaches remove from their conversations real or implied threats.* They refuse to use comments such as, "Marlene, if you expect to be teaching in this conference next year, you had better. . . ."

2. *Administrators and coaches actively develop rapport with all staff members.* This does not necessarily mean that leaders are close friends with everyone. However, it does mean that leaders demonstrate caring attitudes toward their

employees by being willing to put aside their work to discuss personal and work-related problems with staff members.

3. *Administrators and coaches are familiar with different leadership styles and use them effectively.* Kenneth Blanchard suggests that flexible leadership approaches allow supervisors/coaches to “use different strokes for different folks.” He also says that sometimes, it is essential to “use different strokes for the same folks.” By this, he means supervisors and coaches should give specific instructions at times, while at other times, they allow for staff freedom and creativity by delegating responsibilities.⁹

4. *Coaches support the staff member's efforts at improvement.* When gaps exist between an employee's skill level and the school's expectations, the coach encourages the person to obtain additional training. When this occurs, the coach should act as a cheerleader, not as an evaluator. The staff member should be able to perceive the coach's remarks as helpful feedback rather than as criticism.

5. *Coaches see mistakes as learning opportunities.* Ellen White highlights this principle: “[Every] mistake, every fault, every difficulty, conquered becomes a stepping stone to better and higher things.”¹⁰ When something goes wrong, wise coaches will say, “OK, this isn't working. What can we learn from this experience?” Staff members must understand that mistakes can help that become better teachers or administrators. They won't be frightened to test new ideas if they know the coach and administrator acknowledge that not all efforts will be successful. When employees know that making a mistake does not make them a failure, coaches will be more likely to persuade them to try new ideas.

6. *Perceptive coaches and administrators know how to separate behaviors from personalities.* They seek ways to encourage employees while also giving honest feedback. For example, when a staff member continuously dominates staff meetings, the administrator or coach will help the person understand that others also have a right to partici-

pate. The coach might say, “Mike, you often have solid ideas to present, and we appreciate them. However, we lose the good ideas other staff members have if you monopolize our meetings.” This combination of affirmation and clear feedback preserves Mike's self-esteem while making him aware of the need to change his behavior.

7. *Successful administrators and*

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coaches acknowledge improvement. Improvement typically comes in small increments. These small steps deserve recognition as much as does a major breakthrough. Feedback that clearly identifies growth and its positive points will produce more improvement. For example: “I am pleased with the improvement you have made in your question strategies. Your wait time after ask-

ing questions has improved nicely,” will encourage a teacher to try other suggestions you make.

8. *Wise administrators and coaches focus on strengths and assets.* Staff members become energized when their supervisor or coach recognizes their strengths. Because of this, it is far more important for coaches and administrators to focus on how much they appreciate their employees’ contributions than on their weaknesses. Hearing a trusted colleague or supervisor’s affirmation gives employees the courage to move forward.¹¹

How Does the Coach Get Started?

Coaching for improvement begins with the coach’s agreement to work closely with an employee. Both the coach and employee must agree that the discussions and observations are for professional improvement and not for evaluation. This applies to both teachers and administrators. This understanding is the first step in creating a climate of trust between the employee and coach.

Once the context is agreed upon, the coach and employee agree on the steps to be followed during the coaching experiences. McAllister and Neubert outline seven steps for successful coaching within a classroom setting. If the coaching experience is with a principal or another employee, the steps can be modified to meet the specific situation.

1. The teacher *prepares a lesson plan* for the observation.
2. The coach and teacher *discuss* the proposed lesson plan to determine the *focus* of the observation.
3. The teacher *presents the lesson* while the coach *records observations* on a coaching form.
4. Following the teaching session, the coach and teacher *debrief each other* by engaging in a *dialogue conference* about the lesson, with both parties actively participating as colleagues. The dialogue conference focuses on *what went well* and *what could be improved*.
5. After the teacher and coach *think reflectively* about what happened, the teacher prepares a “*Reflective Decisions*” statement about what happened in class.

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6. The coach prepares a “*Reflective Comments*” statement. This statement includes the *coach’s reflection* upon what he or she saw while observing the lesson.

7. The lesson plan, coaching dialogue conference, reflective decisions, and reflective comments provide *documentation to interpret and assess* the coaching experience as the teacher and coach review what happened.¹²

How Does the Coach Give Feedback to the Teacher?

The most crucial part of the coaching process is the debriefing conference. During the conference, the teacher and coach review, analyze, and reflect upon the lesson. This conference is a non-directive meeting. The coach seeks to help the teacher analyze what happened and make decisions about what was effective and what didn’t go well.

During this meeting, the coach deals with four types of feedback:

Praise. The coach expresses approval for what the teacher did well in relation to the skill focus. The coach also explains why he or she thinks the behavior was effective. Praise comments serve several purposes:

1. They explain why the behaviors

were singled out for approval.

2. They link the specific behavior to a generalized reason for effectiveness.

3. They boost the teacher’s self-esteem and sense of worth.

Clarifying questions. Clarifying questions help the coach to better understand what happened during the lesson or the debriefing conference. The coach can also use them indirectly to express reservations he or she may have about an aspect of the lesson. Example: “I noticed that you seemed to ignore Mary’s hand when you were calling for responses to your questions. Was there a particular reason for doing this?”

Eliciting questions. The coach uses eliciting questions to prompt the teacher to explore alternatives or options. Example: “What other audio-visual aid could you have used in addition to the chalkboard?” Like clarifying questions, eliciting questions help the teacher to become an active listener and to reflect on the choices he or she makes while planning and teaching the lesson. Eliciting questions are particularly useful in helping teachers to recall instructional strategies they learned in methods courses or their professional reading.

Eliciting questions begin with leads such as the following: “Is there another

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way you might have. . . ?” “Did you learn any strategies in your curriculum courses that would be appropriate to use for. . . ?” “Is there anything you might do differently if you were to repeat this lesson?” “How else might the students. . . ?”

Leading questions. Coaches use leading questions to suggest ways to improve performance. By putting the suggestions in question form, the coach

helps the teacher to think about alternatives without feeling criticized. The following question cues exemplify what the coach might ask: “Do you think . . . ?” “What would happen if. . . ?” “Could you have. . . ?”¹³

How Important Are Written Observations?

Throughout the observation phase of the coaching experience, the coach

must take notes that serve as reminders during the debriefing conference. McAlister and Neubert designed an observation sheet they call the “Praise-Question-Polish (PQP) Sheet.” Coaches will find it easier to organize their written observations if they have this sheet in front of them while visiting the classroom. The coach can thus collect and organize praise comments as well as clarifying, eliciting, and leading questions as he or she observes the lesson.

The Praise-Question-Polish Sheet

Praise: What went well? Why was it effective?

Questions:

Clarifying questions—Questions asked because the coach doesn’t understand what has happened.

Eliciting questions—Questions asked to encourage the teacher to explore other options for change or variety.

Polish:

Leading questions—Suggestions the coach wants to make are formatted as questions.

How Can a Coach Promote Professional Growth?

An essential aspect of coaching is helping staff members to grow professionally. The first step in doing this is to review the person’s job description, which should define the core competencies for which the individual can be held accountable. (“Competencies” are defined as a skill, ability, area of knowledge, set of experiences, or attitudes.) With this information and the data generated by the coach’s observations, the coach and staff member can determine whether any gaps exist between the person’s competencies and the requirements of the job description.¹⁴

David B. Peterson and Mary Dee Hicks suggest that coaches guide their colleagues toward GAPS information: combining the teacher’s own Goals and Abilities with the Perceptions and Standards of others.¹⁵ As they work through the process, the gap between abilities/goals and perceptions/standards will become the basis for a professional development plan created by the teacher in cooperation with the coach.

Opportunities for visiting and observing an identified master teacher should be an essential element of the professional development plan. The master teacher and the observer should engage in a debriefing conference as part of the “coaching-observation” experience.

Praising to Reinforce Good Performance

All the good accomplished by the coaching process can be lost if the coach and other administrators fail to reinforce good performance. They can do this by providing effective feedback, which includes both praise and criticism about staff performance.¹⁶

Unfortunately, praise is rarely given. In fact, some leaders say they do not have time to give praise. When praise is not forthcoming, morale is more likely to drop and the quality of performance will almost surely drop as well. Praise recognizes a staff member’s outstanding performance and is designed to motivate the person to a repeat performance.

Praise is not just saying someone is “the best.” Stone asks, “What then, is good praise? It is sincere, concise, and specific. And it is delivered in a manner that communicates enthusiasm for the work done or extra effort expended by the employee.”¹⁷

Look at this example: “Rosemary, thank you for volunteering to plan the International Day Celebration. Your organizational skills and enthusiasm made

it possible for all of us to look good.” The inflection and intonation of the praise message should contain no hidden messages. “As coach, you want your praise to encourage further efforts,” says Stone.¹⁸

Conclusion

The best way to plan for the future of education is to invest in today’s teaching and administrative professionals. Coaches provide a critical means for professional development and enhancing the skills of Adventist educators. ✍

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REFERENCES

1. Florence M. Stone, *Coaching, Counseling, and Mentoring: How to Choose and Use the Right Technique to Boost Employee Performance* (New York: American Management Association, 1998), p. 11.
2. Radio Broadcast, July 14, 1999, WSVB, Harrisonburg, Va., “Speaking of Career Coaching.”
3. Once a goal is chosen, there needs to be a theory or strategy for implementation. Goals suggest what the person being coached will achieve; the theory of action tells how he or she will achieve the goal. The purpose of an action strategy is to frame a problem and to develop a way to fulfill the goal. (See Robert A. Hargrove, *Masterful Coaching: Extraordinary Results by Impacting People and the Way They Think and Work Together* [San Francisco:

- Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer, 1995], pp. 117, 118.)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
5. Elizabeth A. McAllister and Gloria A. Neubert, *New Teachers Helping New Teachers: Preserve Peer Coaching* (Bloomington, Ind.: ERIC Clearinghouse, 1995), p. 8.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Stone, p. 16.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
9. Kenneth Blanchard, *Leadership Training for Supervisors: Situational Leadership II—Facilitator’s Guide* (Escondido, Calif.: Blanchard Training and Development, 1990), p. 174.
10. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1952), p. 296.
11. Stone, pp. 19, 20.
12. McAllister, p. 21.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-87.
14. David B. Peterson and Mary Dee Hicks, *Leader as Coach: Strategies for Coaching and Developing Others* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Personnel Decisions International, 1996), pp. 57, 58.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
16. Stone, pp. 22, 23.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

For Additional Reading

If you wish to study about coaching in greater depth, I highly recommend these books:

- Minor, Marianne. *Coaching and Counseling: A Practical Guide for Managers and Team Leaders*. Menlo Park, Calif.: Crisp Publications, Inc., 1996.
- Peterson, David B., and Mary Dee Hicks. *Leader as Coach: Strategies for Coaching and Developing Others* (1996). Personnel Decisions International, 2000 Plaza VII Tower, 45 South Seventh Street, Minneapolis, MN 55401-1608. Excellent book. Ranks a close second to *Coaching, Counseling, and Mentoring*.
- Stone, Florence M. *Coaching, Counseling, and Mentoring: How to Choose and Use the Right Technique to Boost Employee Performance*. New York: American Management Association, 1998. This is my favorite book on coaching.

Each of these books is now available on the Internet from amazon.com at a discount.

Goals • Abilities • Perceptions • Standards

Goals:

What he or she wants to do.

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Abilities:

What he or she can do.

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Perceptions:

How others see the person.

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Standards:

What others expect of him or her.

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Adapted from Peterson and Hicks, *Leader as Coach*, p. 57.